Demon's Exile: Part Two

VraieEsprit

Tenchi Muyo

Complete

Created by FicLab

www.ficlab.com

Demon's Exile: Part Two

VraieEsprit

Copyright Information

This ebook was automatically created by FicLab v1.0.110 on December 8th, 2024, based on content retrieved from www.fanfiction.net/s/3344560/.

The content in this book is copyrighted by VraieEsprit or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved unless explicitly stated otherwise. Please do not share or republish this work without the express permission of the copyright holder.

If you are the author or copyright holder, and would like further information about this ebook, please read the author FAQ at www.ficlab.com/author-faq.

This story was first published on January 16th, 2007, and was last updated on January 31st, 2007.

FicLab ID: _XeYakWr/m4g52qvu/10700E581

Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright Information
Table of Contents
Summary
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14

Summary

title	Demon's Exile: Part Two
author	VraieEsprit
source	https://www.fanfiction.net/s/3344560/
published	January 16th, 2007
updated	January 31st, 2007
words	103,665
chapters	14
status	Complete
rating	Fiction T
tags	Anime/Manga, Complete, Fanfiction, Fi/ Fantasy, Sci, Tenchi Muyo

Description

Tokimi is awake, & Seiryo's loyalties are torn. Ayeka's having frightening dreams, and Ryoko is the target of an attack. Who killed the Sumire's crew? What is Haru hiding? Can Kiyone and Washu find the truth before harm befalls Jurai's Goddess?FINISHED31.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Disclaimer

Oh boy. I really hope the high corpse count in the last part of the story hasn't convinced everyone that I'm a closet psychopath with a fetish for blood-letting. Really, truly, I'm a nice person. Honestly I am. It just kind of panned out that way. My apologies to all. LOL. I hope it hasn't put people off.

Anyhow, this is part two of Demon's Exile. My original focus for this story was Ayeka, so as you can see I've completely stuck to that so far. Not. Sigh. I don't know what it is, but I find it very hard to centralise a story on Ayeka. Sorry, hime-sama… other characters just pull me away. However, I expect she will play a significant part in part two. If my scribbled plan is anything to go by, she will, anyhow. Poor Ayeka. It never rains but it pours…

So some smart people will have figured out something of what's going on in this story already. If you have, please don't post it in reviews and spoil it for other readers :) As I said before, characters have been imported and modified somewhat to fit in with my plans — it must be at least partially clear by now who those characters are ;)

I promise there will be less random slayings in this part of the story. I really don't know what came over me in the last part, but I'm done with the random massacre motif now. Really… Although I suppose if OVA 3 can show all of Z's family being slaughtered in space around him, I guess I have nothing to worry about.

Right…??

Legal regs still applicable :)

Synopsis

Kii magic has finally won through where science has failed.

Tokimi is awake — but what kind of Tokimi has the scientist raised? For many at Jurai's court, their Emperor is playing host to a demon, and now she is conscious again, tensions are rising. Seiryo must decide where to place his loyalties, as his already strained position within the Council comes under even more pressure.

Kiyone is still pursuing her investigation, and with the former Elite's help, has broken through into the file information. Matters take a turn for

the sinister, however, when she intercepts an attempt on Tokimi's life and realises that she knows the assailant! Strange things are happening on Jurai, and Ryoko and Tenchi find themselves once more in the thick of it as a diplomatic ship from one of the outposts is found abandoned in space, with the crew and passengers all dead or missing from their posts. The only survivor is a little girl of Sasami's age — a survivor who claims she saw Tokimi aboard her father's envoy ship. Afraid of civil uprisings, Azusa is eager to solve the case and bring to justice the crew's killer, but is he in danger of making his latest ward a scapegoat in his search for a conclusion?

Could Kihaku's dark magic still be weaving itself within the former Priestess? Or is there some other agent at work — something that will force Ayeka to confront not only her present but her past in order to fully exorcise the nightmare once and for all?

DEMON'S EXILE: PART TWO
A Tenchi Muyo! Fan Fiction
by
VRAIEESPRIT

Chapter One

"And so she's completely recovered consciousness?"

Azusa, Emperor of Jurai sat back in his throne, stroking his beard thoughtfully as he met the gaze of his companion. "Washu-san, it seems your mission to Jurai has now been successful — I'm glad you were able to find what you were looking for deep in the royal vault."

"And I'm grateful for you letting me look, Azusa-sama." Washu said simply, setting the aged volume down on a nearby unit and casting him a faint smile. "I'm returning this to you personally, so that you know for sure I haven't waltzed off with it. It's probably not dangerous for anyone in your court to find it, but I don't want you believing I'm using it to plot some kind of Kii-magic rebellion against your planet."

"Do you think me so paranoid as that?" Azusa's lips broke in to a broad smile as he appreciated the humour in his companion's tones. "No, Washu-san. But I appreciate the return of the volume anyway. It strikes me that there are a lot of things unknown about certain settlements and peoples of our past. It's nice to know not everything has been lost."

He tilted his head, eying her keenly.

"And your sister? How grave are her mental injuries?" He asked

softly. A shadow flitted across Washu's expression and she shrugged her shoulders.

"Hard to say, yet." She admitted. "She's still very confused and afraid by her surroundings, so it's hard to know how much she does and doesn't understand. She spoke, but when she did so it was pretty much entirely in Kii, and I don't think she has any recollection of her life after she became Priestess of Kihaku. She knew who I was, so I know her memories haven't been completely severed. But I suspect that what I've done to wake her hasn't yet been enough. It's my feeling that I'll have to try again once I've regathered my strength fully from the last time. It took a lot to do — more than I imagined — and I'm still a little shaky inside. However, she is awake and on the road to recovery. For that I'm thankful."

"Perhaps it would be better for everyone if Tokimi did not recall the events that led her to attack my great grandson." Azusa said thoughtfully. "Surely no benefit could come from such a memory?"

"No, I agree with you." Washu nodded her head. "Especially at the moment — she's far too confused to really understand and I don't think it would be at all good for her to try and reason out all the complexities. But I do want to try and help her piece other things together. She's… almost like a child, if you can understand what I mean. Although I'm glad that the darkness has gone from within her, I'm not quite sure how much of the real Tokimi it's left behind. Not yet."

"I'm sure that time will tell." Azusa said comfortably. "May I ask why you felt it so important to bring this news to my chamber, Washu-san? I was under the impression you didn't like me very much."

"Tokimi is sort of reliant on your goodwill." Washu said with a shrug of her shoulders. "Now she's awake, you could easily kick her off your planet and I wanted to be sure you wouldn't do that. Lord Tennan and his sister have volunteered to continue their support of her, and I would like very much that she stay here. So I hoped that, if I came and spoke to you directly, you would think twice before evicting Tokimi from Jurai."

"I have no plans to evict her. You can put your mind at rest." Azusa assured her. "Her magic is gone, correct? She is no longer a threat to Lady Sasami or anyone here on Jurai?"

"Exactly." Washu looked relieved. "She's just an average Kii girl now, who's poor brain is still very muddled."

“You won’t be taking her to the Earth?”

“It’s too soon to want to take her anywhere.” Washu reflected. “But honestly, I don’t think the Earth would be a good environment for her. So many things there that she wouldn’t be able to understand — it would scare her, and there isn’t the mass of medical or technological support there that you can find here on Jurai. This planet is peaceful — at least outwardly — whereas on the Earth squabbles break out between divided nations pretty much all of the time. Quiet and safe my home in the mountains might be, but even so it’s not somewhere I would want to take my sister. Besides, what Lord Seiryo and his sister can provide for her here goes far beyond what I could provide for her on the Earth. If you don’t object to her continued stay, I think this is the best place for her to be.”

“Then this is where she shall remain.” Azusa said seriously. “You levelled many accusations against my ancestors, Washu-san, when you testified at Lord Tennan’s original hearing. Many of those accusations do hold water, and perhaps it is Jurai’s responsibility to bear the consequences in this way. Tokimi’s illness was precipitated by Juraian greed, however much Kihaku’s own wild spirit was involved. Therefore it seems only right that we offer the woman hospitality and protection, now that she has need of it.”

“Thank you, Lord Azusa.” Washu’s face broke into a surprised smile. “Though I’m sorry I laid into your people so harshly. After all, noone here is to blame for the death of my world. And really, there are a lot of things about Jurai that I like — Sasami-sama observed that I have more loyalties to Jurai than I did to Kihaku, in some ways, and I think she’s right. But I’m grateful that you’ll let Tokimi stay. It’s a weight off my mind that I can continue to see and help her here, in a gentle environment.”

“As you say.” Azusa agreed. “I will make it officially known that Tokimi is a ward of Jurai and as such gains honorary citizen status. You need not concern yourself with that, Washu-san. I will make sure that it is well understood by all.”

“Azusa-heika!”

At that moment the door of the throne room slid open and Azaka hurried in, pausing at the foot of the steps to make his obeissance to his King. “And Lady Washu, pardon me for interrupting. But your Highness, the Admiral sends an urgent message and requires your attention right away!”

“The Admiral?” Azusa’s brows creased in confusion. “Very well,

Azaka. Thank you… I'll attend to it."

He ran his palm over the arm of his chair, activating a communication window and hitting the 'open channel' button as he sat back more comfortably in his seat. The grainy visage of a man appeared before him, dressed in the impeccable uniform of a Juraian military man, and as his image became more stable, he saluted his King sharply.

"Lord Azusa, I apologise for the intrusion, but I have some alarming news."

"Alarming news?" Azusa looked apprehensive. "Of what nature, my Lord Admiral? What has happened?"

"Central command has received a distress flare from the defensive outpost in sector two-five-nine-eight." The Admiral said gravely, and a blip of light flickered across his brow as he spoke. "Earlier this afternoon the ship Sumire passed into that sector on it's way to Jurai. However, when the outpost attempted to send signals to the ship, it received no direct communication in return."

"The Sumire?" Azusa's expression became one of alarm. "But that's the diplomatic ship… from Kanemitsu."

"Precisely, my Lord." The Admiral's tone became grim. "When they were unable to elicit a response, several of our units were deployed to the craft, in case they had met with some kind of engine trouble or failure. You remember there was a delay at Headquarters — although noone seems to be quite sure what that delay was."

"And what did they discover, Admiral?" Azusa looked grave. "I'm guessing by your mode of address that something has gone badly wrong."

"Yes, sir, you could say that." The Admiral agreed. "According to the report, the crew of the ship were either slain or missing — I'm informed several men were jettisoned into space, and although we tried to find survivors within the ship's orbit, we failed. The captain, Kumashiro-san and his aide were all found murdered aboard the ship — their throats had been cut."

"I see." Azusa's eyes became sad as beside him, Washu let out an exclamation of horror. "There were no survivors at all, Admiral?"

"One, sir. A little girl — Kumashiro-san's daughter, I understand." The Admiral said slowly. "The girl is in a state of shock, understandably, and my men have taken her aboard their base with a view to flying her to mainland Jurai as soon as clearance can be

obtained. From their reports she doesn't seem to be badly hurt. They found her huddled in the corner of the chamber in which the bodies of her father and his aide were found, and the shock of the whole incident has made her more than a little bit indistinct about what happened. She claims she doesn't remember and that she didn't see anyone else on board the ship."

"Of course she must come to Jurai, the poor child." Azusa's eyes softened. "As for the rest, have the Galaxy Police been notified?"

"Yes, sir, but as yet we've received no word back." The Admiral agreed. "Since the incident occured in Jurai's space, it is our jurisdiction."

"And our responsibility to resolve, before Kanemitsu believe there is a conspiracy against us holding peaceful talks." Azusa frowned, biting his lip as he considered. "Very well, Admiral. Make sure your men know that the girl is brought to Jurai as soon as possible and we will do everything we can to make her comfortable here whilst we try and contact her family on Kanemitsu. The bodies of those men who can be retrieved must also be — it would be bad form if we were to leave things as they are, and Kanemitsu is a turbulent political planet at the best of times. Above all, Admiral, we must ensure that a full investigation is carried out into what happened aboard this ship. Make sure the appropriate actions are taken."

"Yes sir. I will do so, at once."

The admiral saluted again, then the screen flickered and went dark. With a sigh, Azusa ran his hand over the control once more, as the monitor disappeared once more from view.

"That's all we need." He murmured, more to himself than anyone else.

"Lord Azusa?" Washu's voice startled him and he glanced up in surprise, registering the fact that the scientist was still there. There was a troubled expression on her face, and the Emperor frowned.

"Washu-san, I'm sorry. I hadn't realised you were within the throne room still." He said apologetically. "Unfortunately not all news that Jurai receives is of the nice kind."

"Murdered out in space." Washu frowned. "I wonder. It seems almost too much of a coincidence."

"A coincidence? What do you mean?" Azusa eyed her curiously, and Washu shrugged her shoulders.

“Nothing, really.” She admitted. “It just seems strange, how all of the crew and passengers on board were killed.”

“Except the little girl — she must have hidden and escaped notice.” Azusa sighed. “Unfortunately where Juraian diplomatic negotiations are concerned, unexpected things can and do happen.”

“I’m sure of that.” Washu said acidly, and Azusa frowned.

“Washu-san, I did not have anything to do with this business.” He said softly. “I didn’t invite those people here so that someone could board their ship and eliminate them before they got here. I don’t want civil rioting on a planet that has always been something of a handful to control. This is a matter of extreme political delicacy — and now it’s been made even more so.”

“I didn’t think you were behind it, Lord Azusa.” Washu told him flippantly.

“But you think you know who is?” Azusa looked suspicious. Washu hesitated, then she shook her head regretfully.

“I don’t have the slightest idea.” She admitted sadly. “I wish I did, because if I did I would tell you.”

“Then what do you mean about coincidences?”

“I heard a report a while ago about another ship where the crew were all killed. That’s all… I don’t remember the details exactly.” Washu said with a shrug. “Perhaps there’s a serial killer lurking in Deep Space.”

“Yes, perhaps there is… but since this happened in Jurai space, it’s going to be my concern to catch them and bring them to justice here.” Azusa said with a frown. “Still, first things first. The girl will arrive here and we must do what we can to take care of her. After all, it may be that she saw something — and then we can begin to unravel what happened to Hajime Kumashiro and his companions.”

“Good afternoon, Tokimi!”

Sasami pushed open the door of the infirmary side ward, excitement glittering in her crimson eyes as she surveyed the patient. “Suki and I have come to visit you since you’re all alone — and look, we brought you some flowers, too! Washu told Uncle that you were awake and we really wanted to come see you!”

The girl glanced up from her bed, pulling her wrap more tightly

around her shoulders as she glanced fearfully from one visitor to the other. Despite the fact she was dressed in regulation Juraian sickroom bedwear, there was something ethereal and unworldly still about the woman who had once wielded so much power over so many parts of the universe. Her thick brown hair was braided back from her face by a broad white ribbon, but a few wisps of the tea-coloured waves had come loose from the tie, framing her face and making her look both gentle and delicate. Big blue eyes took in everything around her, but there was a flicker of confusion in the two-tone sapphire gaze, and an underlying air of fragility was the only indication that anything was wrong with her at all.

At the patient's uncertainty, Suki put a hand on Sasami's shoulder to stop her friend from going any further, stepping cautiously into the chamber and offering Tokimi a smile.

"We're friends, Tokimi." She said softly, holding out a tentative hand to her companion and Tokimi stared at her for a moment, as if trying to reason out what the girl meant. Then a tiny smile touched her lips and, very hesitantly, she stretched pale fingers out to touch Suki's. Suki beamed.

"That's right." She agreed, grasping Tokimi's hand loosely and giving it a gentle squeeze. "Do you mind if Sasami and I come and sit with you a while? I know a lot of things have happened to you so far, and you probably don't know whether you're coming or going. But we'd like to, if it's okay."

"We brought these for you." Sasami added, stepping forward at that moment and setting the delicate bouquet of wild Juraian blooms down on the bedcover. Tokimi's eyes lit up with delight at this gesture and she scooped the flowers up in her hands, touching the petals gently with the tip of her finger. Sasami grinned.

"You like flowers, huh?" She asked gently. "Washu thought you'd like it, if we brought some to brighten up your room — now you can see and smell them, we'll bring you lots more. I promise."

Tokimi glanced at the flowers once more, then held out her hand to Sasami, imitating the gesture Suki had made towards her as she grasped the princess's fingers in hers.

"Friends." She said quietly, and Sasami nodded.

"Yes. Suki and I are your friends." She agreed. "So it's okay if we stay, then?"

Tokimi looked startled, then she smiled. Setting the flowers down

on the unit beside her, she carefully patted the side of the bed and Sasami settled herself obediently on the covers, pulling Suki down with her.

“I don’t know how much of what we say you can understand, Tokimi.” The young noblewoman said slowly. “According to Seiryo-niichan, you’re still a bit confused. But if you can understand what we’re saying to you, can you tell us? I know you speak Kii, but neither Sasami nor I know how to and we’d really like to be able to talk to you.”

Tokimi pursed her lips, shadows touching her blue eyes as she considered their words.

“Kihaku is gone.” She said quietly, and Suki and Sasami exchanged looks, Sasami nodding her head.

“Yes, it is, and we’re sorry.” She agreed. “But you’re quite safe here on Jurai. I promise — we want you to be here with us.”

“Onee-sama said so.” Tokimi spoke slowly and carefully, her words tinged with the same exotic accent that Sasami had heard when they had encountered one another in the dead planet’s core, but somehow the intonation was so different it was hard to believe the speaker was the same woman.

“You can speak our language, then?” Suki asked gently. “We weren’t sure if you would remember. You’ve been very ill, you know — we were all worried about you.”

“I… don’t know.” Tokimi hesitated, looking bewildered. “Some things… I think.”

“Well, you do your best and if you don’t understand, just tell us.” Sasami said comfortably. “You did speak it, before you were hurt, so I’m sure you can remember more and more as your brain gets better. And maybe you can tell us some Kii, as well. We’d both like that.”

Tokimi glanced at the flowers once more, a soft smile touching her lips.

“Kihaku had pretty flowers.” She remembered. “But these are different. I don’t see these flowers on Kihaku.”

“No, they’re from here on Jurai.” Suki said. “From within the royal gardens. Sasami and I picked out the prettiest ones for you — I’m glad that you like them.”

Tokimi reached out a hand to touch Sasami’s long hair, her fingers moving carefully and gingerly over the blossoms that the princess had

delicately wound into her long, thick locks.

“Can Tokimi have flowers, too?” She asked hopefully. “In my hair? Like you?”

“Oh, for sure.” Sasami dimpled. “We can put some of these in your hair, if you like. Sit very still, Tokimi — I’m going to unfasten your braid and I don’t want you to get your hair tangled up in anything. Suki, do you see a hairbrush anywhere? I’m going to style Tokimi’s hair like Ayeka and I wear ours during flower festivals.”

“Yes, I think so.” Suki glanced around her, sliding off the bed as she spotted a brush lying on the shelf by the door. She scooped it up, handing it to her friend. “Here. She has a lot of hair, Sasami — that’s why we braided it in the first place. But I think she’d look very pretty, with a coronet of flowers.”

“Well, what have I walked in on?”

A fresh voice from the doorway startled the trio and Tokimi let out a gasp, alarm flickering in her blue eyes at the sudden sound. Sasami turned to glance towards the door, a smile lighting up her features as she recognised the speaker.

“Seiryo-san, come in.” She said warmly. “I thought you were still at the Council session, but if you like you can help Suki and I decorate Tokimi’s hair with flowers.”

“I can’t imagine why you’d think I’d be any good at that.” Seiryo looked amused. “Good afternoon, Tokimi. I’m glad to see that you’re sitting up and able to receive guests.”

“Friend…?” Tokimi held out a hesitant hand, and Seiryo stared at her, nonplussed.

“Pardon me?”

“Just take her hand, Nii-chan.” Suki told him with a grin. “She wants to know if you’re a friend or not, that’s all.”

“Oh.” Seiryo smiled ruefully, obediently taking Tokimi’s hand in hers and squeezing the thin, delicate fingers slightly. “Yes, I suppose I am a friend, Tokimi.”

Tokimi’s eyes sparkled and she offered him a warm smile in return. Carefully she scooped up one of the flowers that Sasami had scattered all over her bedspread, holding it out to the bemused nobleman, who took it, glancing at it and then back at the patient. Suki giggled.

“Seiryo-niichan, I think you have an admirer.” She teased. Seiryo

grimaced in his sister's direction, shaking his head.

"Not funny." He said frankly, dropping down into the seat on the far side of the bed as Sasami carefully unwound the thick braid of hair, setting the silky white ribbon down as she brushed Tokimi's brown waves out so they fell across her shoulders and down her back.

"She's just so cute." The princess said pensively. "Washu said that she was still confused and a bit like a child, and I wasn't sure what she meant. But she is… sort of simplistic and gentle, somehow. Don't you think so?"

"Her mind took a heck of a beating." Seiryo eyed the former priestess thoughtfully. "It's almost frightening, that a calculating semi-goddess could be reduced to the capacity of a child just by coming into contact with dark, twisted magic."

"On balance, I prefer her this way." Sasami squeezed Tokimi's hand, grinning at her conspiratorially as she began to wind the first blossom into the top of the girl's hair. "At least this Tokimi seems to be happy. The other one wasn't. Even if she never recovers herself fully, I think that this was a good thing. When we gave her the flowers, her eyes lit up like nothing else. It was so sweet."

"Washu said she was a gentle soul, before." Seiryo admitted. "Perhaps she's right. Maybe there are elements of that Tokimi still inside of her."

"I think so." Suki looked thoughtful. "But we should be careful how we talk. She can understand what we say — at least, a lot of it. It's hard to know how much, really, but she seems to follow when Sasami and I speak to her."

She hesitated, then cast her brother a smile.

"But Nii-chan, seeing her this way… makes me realise how much you really did go through to recover yourself." She added softly. "Considering that, I think we have a lot to be thankful to Tsunami for."

"Tsunami?" Seiryo raised an eyebrow, as Sasami exchanged amused looks with her friend. "I think that my recovery was my hard work, thank you, Suki. I don't remember asking the goddess for any particular favours… you know where I stand on those things."

"Tsunami." Tokimi repeated the word carefully, raising her gaze and meeting Sasami's startled crimson eyes with soft blue ones. The former priestess tilted her head on one side, her expression breaking into a warm smile as she touched Sasami's cheek.

“Tokimi?” Suki frowned. “Didn’t Sasami tell you to sit still? What are you doing?”

“Tsunami… I remember.” Tokimi did not take her gaze off her young companion. “Tsunami is friend of Washu… so a friend of Tokimi also.”

“What have you girls been telling her?” Seiryo raised an eyebrow. “Tokimi, Tsunami is an old Juraian legend — that’s all. And you really needn’t be worrying about it. Let’s stick to the real world, okay? And not start talking about imaginary tree goddesses. Really, for your own sake, you’d do better to forget about Tsunami altogether.”

“She was here.” Tokimi hesitated, then met the nobleman’s malachite eyes, a serious look in her own expression as she put her hand clumsily to her chest, spreading her hand over the place her heart beat beneath her ribs. “With Tokimi.”

“Tokimi.” Sasami’s eyes softened. “Yes, that’s right. I didn’t realise you remembered that, too. Washu said you couldn’t remember anything from before… before your father died. But you remember Tsunami, so I guess you remember more than I thought.”

Tokimi dimpled, holding her hands out in a gesture of friendship.

“Tsunami helps Tokimi.” She whispered. “That’s what I remember. Tsunami came to help Tokimi. And now again… Tsunami helps.”

“You are really too, too cute.” Sasami laughed, setting the flowers aside as she hugged her companion tightly. “Of course. Tsunami helps everyone she can, you know. That’s what makes her so special to so many people on Jurai. She’s always there, if you need her. And she’d love to be your friend, just like Suki and Seiryo and I are.”

“For her own sake, I wouldn’t encourage her to talk about Tsunami.” Seiryo warned. “People might wonder about it — given the past.”

“There’s no harm in her saying she likes Jurai’s goddess, Nii-chan. Relax.” Suki ordered. “Besides, Tsunami did help her. Tsunami brought her back to Jurai and Tokimi’s grateful. That’s all. She’s happy to be alive, and that was thanks to Tsunami.”

“I thought Washu-sama and Sasami-sama brought Tokimi back from Kihaku. Not Tsunami-kami-sama.” Seiryo said frankly. “Let’s not turn this into another story of miraculous divine intervention, Suki. Sasami-sama may be descended from Tsunami’s line, but that’s a far cry from claiming the goddess acted within her.”

Sasami laughed, amusement sparkling in her eyes.

“Well, I suppose the how of it doesn’t really matter too much right now.” She said vaguely. “What does is that Tokimi is here and is feeling better. And hey, since she is, surely we can take her out into the palace grounds for a while? I mean, so long as we didn’t take her too far and tire her out — what do you think, Seiryo-san? Do you think Washu would mind, if we did? Some fresh air might do her good and then she could pick her own flowers. I’m almost done with her hair.”

“I don’t see why it would hurt, although you might want to check with the doctor on duty.” Seiryo shrugged his shoulders. “From what I understand, Azusa-heika hasn’t put her under any restriction and you’re likely right -sitting around in a sick room probably won’t help her any now she’s awake.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” Sasami re-tied the white ribbon in Tokimi’s long hair, casting the girl a smile. “Would you like that, Tokimi? Would you like to come play in the fields with us, and pick flowers?”

“Flowers?” Tokimi’s eyes sparkled. “With Tsunami?”

“Sasami.” Sasami corrected, nodding her head. “Yes. And Suki… Seiryo-san, will you come too?”

“To pick flowers?” Seiryo eyed the princess warily, but Tokimi held out her hand, an emploring look in her blue eyes.

“Is Nii-chan coming?” She asked hopefully. “To help Tokimi pick flowers?”

“I told you that you had an admirer.” Suki laughed. “Come on, Seiryo… it wouldn’t hurt for once, would it? To make a poor, sick girl happy?”

“She just called me Nii-chan.” Seiryo stared at the patient, non-plussed.

“Well, she probably heard Suki do it.” Sasami shrugged her shoulders. “And to her, I guess, you are a big brother.”

“Sasami-sama, Tokimi is almost as old as Lady Washu. And I assure you, I’m not older than that.” Seiryo said dryly.

“Not Nii-chan?” Tokimi looked crestfallen, and Sasami sent Seiryo a meaningful look. Seiryo sighed, then shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh, fine.” He said at length, getting to his feet. “If you want to call

me Nii-chan, Tokimi, you can. It… it's okay. After all, in a sense you *do* belong to my family now. And I suppose it wouldn't hurt if I came — but only this once, to humour her. I'm not making a habit of it — flowers are *not* my subject of choice."

"Yay!" Sasami's eyes sparkled. "It'll be so nice, to show her around the palace. It's always fun when someone new comes to visit, because there are so many pretty places."

"I'll go speak to the doctor, and see what he says." Seiryo volunteered, resignation in his expression as he made his way towards the door. "If you're taking her out, she can't wear her nightclothes, and I don't think I want to explain to the infirmary staff why I'm hanging around while a female patient is changing. I'm sure you can both manage that far better than I can, anyway."

"That's true. I didn't think of that." Sasami looked anxious, but Suki grinned.

"It's all right, Sasami-chan. I'll run home and grab something of mine." She offered. "Tokimi doesn't really have her own clothes, but I'm sure she's no bigger than I am and I can bring a few things back with me. Mother might have something, too — when I explain to her, I'm sure she won't mind lending."

"Oh, that's a good idea." Sasami sighed with relief. "For a minute there I wasn't sure how we'd do it."

"Then it's decided. You stay with Tokimi and we'll both be back as soon as possible." Seiryo said with a wry smile. "After all, I wouldn't want to miss the opportunity to gather flowers, would I?"

With that he was gone, and Suki chuckled, shaking her head in amusement.

"Seems that Tokimi is a persuasive soul." She said. "Guess she still has a hold over my brother, even now."

"She's too cute to refuse, that's all." Sasami laughed. "You know, though, you seem a different person with Tokimi somehow."

"I do?" Suki frowned. "How so?"

"I don't know. Less shy, I suppose… you don't seem at all afraid to speak to her." Sasami shrugged, and Suki looked embarassed.

"Well, it's silly but it's almost like she needs looking after a whole lot and I suppose it makes me want to do it." She said self-consciously, patting Tokimi absently on the arm as she did so, and causing that girl to send her a shy smile. "Is that crazy? She just seems so young and

vulnerable."

"I know what you mean." Sasami looked thoughtful. "Do you think that you can find her something to wear? It would be nice to take her out."

"I'll go now. I won't take long." Suki nodded. "Tokimi, we'll be back soon, all right? Seiryo and I both will. Sasami's going to stay with you, though, so you won't be on your own."

"Sasami?" Tokimi looked confused, and Sasami squeezed her hand.

"That's me." She said playfully. 'Remember? Sasami, Suki, Tokimi.' She pointed. "Right?"

"But… Tsunami?" Tokimi seemed genuinely bewildered and Suki sent her friend a nonplussed shrug before disappearing into the hallway, shutting the door behind her. Sasami frowned.

"Tokimi, why do you call me Tsunami?" She asked softly. "It's not my name, you know. My name is Sasami."

"I don't understand." Tokimi shook her head. "You are Tsunami. You were here… with Tokimi."

She touched her chest again, then,

"You helped Tokimi. Yes?"

"Oh, I see." Sasami sighed. "Of course, you remember me… *Tsunami*… touching minds with you on Kihaku and I suppose that's why. But you have to understand, Tokimi, Tsunami is just, well, a part of me. Sasami is who I really am. That's the name my Mother and Father gave me and really, everyone calls me Sasami."

"Not Tsunami?" Tokimi looked doubtful, and Sasami bit her lip, trying to work out how best to explain their strange connection. As she did so, a realisation dawned on her and she eyed the former Priestess as if seeing her for the first time.

"You're Kii." She murmured. "Like Washu. I'm stupid. I forgot that you can see things. You saw Tsunami as Sasami on Kihaku and now you're confused because you're not sure what you remember. Well, that's all right, I suppose. I guess I'll just have to think of a simple way to explain it."

"To… explain it?" Tokimi echoed, then, "I don't understand."

"Well, I'll try and make you." Sasami promised. "You're right — I suppose I am Tsunami, in some ways. But all of my friends call me Sasami and my family too. And well, I want us to be friends. Don't

you want that?"

"Yes… I want to be friends." Tokimi agreed slowly.

"Then it would be nice if you called me Sasami too." Sasami responded simply. "Then you'd be like my other friends, wouldn't you? Everyone calls me that. I'd like you to do it, as well."

"Sasami?" Tokimi repeated. Sasami nodded.

"That's right. Sasami." She agreed. "You call me that and I'll call you Tokimi. And we'll be friends. All right?"

"All right. Sasami. We'll be friends." Tokimi's eyes shone with understanding, and Sasami grinned.

"It's a deal." She agreed. "Hey, you can get out of bed, can't you? I mean, if we're going to take you walking — I forgot to find out if you can, well, walk. Can you get up, or not? Or don't you know, yet?"

Tokimi looked bewildered, and Sasami carefully pulled the bedclothes back, tapping Tokimi lightly on the knees.

"Can you stand up?" She asked. "Or do you need help?"

"I… I can stand up." Tokimi agreed, carefully manoeuvring herself around so that a pair of delicate white legs dangled over the side of the raised hospital pallet. Cautiously, and using the wooden bedhead as a support, she pulled herself into an upright position, turning to send her companion a look of triumph. "See? I can."

"Good." Sasami looked relieved. "Well, then while we're waiting for Seiryo and Suki to get back, why don't we take a little walk down the hallway? There's a mirror in the washroom at the far end and you can see how your hair looks. You really are very pretty, Tokimi — you should see it, before we wreck it all trying to help you get dressed."

"All right." Tokimi agreed, and Sasami linked her hand in her companion's, guiding her carefully towards the door.

"It's not too far." She promised, as the girl hesitated. "I suppose you're not sure what's outside the room, are you? It's all right. Just a corridor and some doors, that's all. And a few people, but they're all nice people and they'll probably be glad to see you moving about."

She slid back the door, leading her companion into the hallway and Tokimi took a couple of tentative steps outside of her chamber, gazing around her with wide, inquisitive eyes. Glancing at her, Sasami once more had the impression that she was guiding a small child, and absently she wondered if this was how Ayeka had felt with her, when

she had been much smaller.

“Like she doesn’t understand anything, and I have to show her.” She mused. “I always wondered how Ayeka liked having a new sister — she was so much older when I was born. I guess that if it was like this, it must’ve been a lot of fun for her. So much to show me and stuff — maybe that’s why we’re so close. I hope I can help Tokimi learn as much as Ayeka helped me. It’s so hard to know whether Tokimi is still just confused from what she’s been through or if this is permanent. Or I suppose it could just be that she’s having trouble understanding the language we’re speaking. But still, it’s kind of sweet. Even if she did get badly hurt, I can’t help feeling that this Tokimi has more to offer the world than the one that Washu and I went to defeat. I knew I was right to want her life saved. I just know she’s going to have a great time now, here on Jurai.”

An exclamation from her companion startled Sasami back to the task in hand and she glanced up at Tokimi in consternation, suddenly aware that the girl had tensed, stopping dead in her tracks. Eying her expression, Sasami was sure she saw a mixture of shock and terror in the sapphire eyes, and what little colour had flushed her cheeks before was now nowhere in evidence.

“Tokimi?” The princess frowned, squeezing her companion’s hand. “Tokimi, come on. What is it? Why are you stopping? It’s not dangerous out here, I promise — the mirror is just through that door.”

Tokimi murmured something in a language Sasami didn’t understand, pulling her hand from Sasami’s grip as she made a harried and fervent gesture. Sasami stared at her, confused by the sudden change in her companion’s demeanour.

“Tokimi?” She murmured. “What on earth is the matter with you? There’s nothing to be afraid of… I’m here and I’ll look after you. We’re friends, remember?”

She took her companion by the arm, trying to guide her gently in the direction of the washroom once more, but this only seemed to agitate Tokimi further. She pulled back against the wall, visibly shaking as she uttered the alien words again. This time there was more urgency in her tones and seeing that her charge was on the verge of hysteria, Sasami frowned, shaking her head.

“All right, so this wasn’t such a good plan.” She said aloud. “We’ll go back to your room, Tokimi — would you prefer that? Shall we go back?”

“Go… back?” Tokimi seemed to register that the princess was there,

nodding her head. “Yes. Go back. Go back.”

She made the strange gesture again, and Sasami followed the direction of her companion’s gaze, unable to fathom why the girl had become so distraught. The hallway was more or less deserted, for it was a quiet time of day and between the heavy bustle and chaos that usually preceded mealtimes. A single nurse was on duty at the furthest end of the lengthy corridor, and her back was to Sasami, engrossed as she was in tending to a patient. From where she stood, Sasami briefly made out the visage of a young girl, about her own age, but the glimpse was a fleeting one and the face meant nothing to her young mind. She turned to gaze at the hallway behind her, but try as she might she could not see anything — person or machine — that might have caused such a reaction in her delicate and unpredictable companion.

She sighed heavily, taking Tokimi’s hands in hers tightly and leading her back towards the bedchamber. This time she found no resistance in her charge, for Tokimi was only too happy to retreat to the safety of her sanctuary. She sank down on the end of the bed, and Sasami could see she was still shaking.

“What on earth happened out there?” Sasami slipped down beside her, sliding a comforting arm around her shoulders. “What’s wrong, Tokimi? What scared you?”

Tokimi murmured the strange words again, and Sasami shook her head.

“I don’t understand Kii.” She said sadly. “Can you tell me in my language, Tokimi? Or do I have to guess?”

Tokimi swallowed hard, gripping hold of Sasami’s hand as she met the Princess’s nonplussed gaze.

“A demon.” She whispered. “Tokimi saw a *demon!*”

Chapter 2

Chapter Two

“And that’s exactly what she said?”

Washu frowned, casting her sister a troubled look as she leant up against the window of the infirmary room. “You’re sure, Sasami? She couldn’t have been confused?”

“No, she was quite adamant.” Sasami looked anxious, twisting her fingers together. “Washu, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare her… taking her out of the room and everything so soon. But I thought she’d be all right and I did want to show her her hair…”

“It’s all right, Sasami.” Washu assured her, offering the princess a faint smile as she did so. “I didn’t mean to make you think you’d done wrong. And her hair is very pretty… it just concerns me that she’d say something like that. It seems crazy… random. And yet…”

Sasami brushed stray wisps of the Tokimi’s brown waves back from her brow, biting her lip as she took in the peaceful expression on the girl’s face. She had been unable to fully calm Tokimi’s evident panic, and when Seiryo had returned with the doctor in tow, the medic had insisted on sedating her, to prevent her from further antagonising her delicate condition. Seiryo had immediately dispatched one of the maintenance staff to locate Washu, handling things in his most imperious nobleman manner, and now, half an hour after the incident, all was once more calm in the small, sunshiny chamber. Seiryo had withdrawn once things had settled down, to explain to Suki that there had been a change of plan, and now there remained only Washu and the princess in their mutual vigil.

“She was so looking forward to picking flowers.” The princess said sadly. “And now she’s going to be scared to leave her room, isn’t she?”

“I wish she hadn’t been sedated so quickly. I would have liked to have spoken to her first.” Washu sighed, running her fingers through her hair. “As it is, if I bring it up when she wakes, she’ll likely just get herself upset again and I don’t want to do that. Sasami, tell me again what she did with her hands. Or even better, can you show me? I’m trying to figure this all out but it’s not making a whole lot of sense.”

“I don’t know. Something like…” Sasami hesitated, then fluttered her hands awkwardly in a rough imitation of Tokimi’s actions.

“Something like that? Does that mean anything to you, Washu?”

“Sort of.” Washu’s eyes narrowed, a thoughtful look glittering in their depths. “Sasami, watch me very carefully. Is this what she did?”

She brought her hands up in front of her body, moving them in a quick and concise pattern, and Sasami let out an exclamation, nodding her head.

“Yes! Like that — just like that!” She agreed. “Do you know what it means? Does it mean anything?”

“It’s to ward off evil.” Washu glanced at her hands pensively. “It’s a Kii action, a ritual action. You know my people were very superstitious, Sasami. They believed wholeheartedly in good and evil and that both forces operated within the World… the Priest being the mediator that kept the World on the side of good. Tokimi absorbed those things much more clearly than I did — I suppose if she was afraid…”

She hesitated, touching her sister gently on the cheek.

“Mind you, it could simply have been something she didn’t understand.” She murmured. “Or something she remembered, from a time when Jurai invaded Kihaku. I don’t know what she does and doesn’t know — her mind must be a jumble at the moment and there are many things here which might prove alien to her. If we run with the assumption that she remembers nothing of her life as Kihaku’s Priestess, then anything she learnt from Dr Clay is no longer there. Technology was considered one of the Evils on Kihaku. Maybe she just saw something like that.”

“That reminds me of something else.” Sasami folded her hands in her laps, meeting Washu’s eyes with an earnest gaze. “She called me Tsunami, Washu. Not once but a few times. I tried to explain to her that I wasn’t exactly Tsunami, but she didn’t seem to be convinced. She said I had been within her — or something, and the only way I could get her to drop it was to tell her that friends called me Sasami. She understood that, I think — but she knows that I’m linked with Tsunami and that means she must remember something from her time as Priestess. Mustn’t she?”

“Tsunami’s magic is wide-ranging and very powerful.” Washu sighed, spreading her hands helplessly. “I don’t know. It could simply be that Tsunami’s influence was strong enough that it imprinted itself on Tokimi’s mind even when other things were lost. Or… or I really don’t know. That she’d see something else in you, well, that’s not surprising. She is Kii, after all. But that she’d know you by your other

name — that is interesting. And a bit alarming, too — you probably know that if I can, I want to keep her from remembering what happened when she was Priestess of my world. It can't do her any good to know about those things, and they weren't her fault."

"I don't think she knows about that." Sasami said thoughtfully. "Before the incident in the corridor, she seemed happy and bright. Like she had no cares weighing her down. She was like a small child, you were right… but in a nice way, Washu. An endearing way."

Washu's expression broke into a rueful smile.

"My sister was always quite persuasive." She recalled. "Gentle and sweet and endearing, yes. I think most of those things are preserved from her true self. She is hurt, but she's more Tokimi now than she ever was as Priestess. If nothing else, that at least gives me some comfort."

"I am sorry I did something that scared her, Washu."

"And I told you not to feel like that." Washu scolded her. "We none of us know how Tokimi is going to react to anything, yet. It was probably nothing more than an electronic device or something else that she didn't understand. That's all. If her grasp of your language is as hesitant as you say, it might just be that demon was the only word she could find to describe it."

"But you have misgivings still?"

"A few." Washu admitted. "But it's probably my paranoia coupled with the news about this diplomatic ship. You know, I presume, that something happened aboard it and a lot of people were killed?"

"No, I didn't know." Shock touched Sasami's expression. "How horrible… the poor people!"

"Yes, well, bad things do happen in space these days." Washu said frankly. "But you're right. It is horrible."

"Do you think Tokimi found out somehow, and it upset her?"

"I don't think so." Washu sighed heavily. "Tokimi has no way of finding out news sent to the Emperor, and she has no magic left in her so she can't project astrally or connect with anyone psychically any more. No, I don't think that, Sasami. I just wish I knew what I did think. Something is gnawing away at me, but it won't sit still and let me rationalise it. Tell me again what was out there, when you were there. It was quiet in the hallway, right?"

"Yes." Sasami frowned, struggling to remember. "There was a nurse

and a patient… and some of those machine thingies they wheel in to check heart rate and brain pattern. Nothing else that I can remember. Nothing odd at all. It was really peaceful actually."

"Oh well. No doubt it will come to me." Washu shrugged her shoulders. "For the time being, let's let her rest."

"*Will* you ask her, when she wakes?"

"No." Washu looked thoughtful. "No, I'd rather not. Whatever she thought she saw, I don't want to make her upset again. So unless she mentions it to you, Sasami, don't say anything to her. All right? It's possible it was just a passing fancy — a flicker of a memory darting through her muddled brain — and if that's the case it can stay lost."

"All right." Sasami nodded solemnly. "I'll remember."

She got to her feet, pausing to cast Tokimi a final glance, then shrugging. "I guess I'll do as you say, and let her sleep. It's just such a shame. She would have loved to come see the flowers."

"Sasami, she has the rest of her life to enjoy Jurai's flowers." Washu smiled ruefully. "Don't trouble yourself on that account — they'll still be there when she wakes up."

"I guess you're right." Sasami reflected. "Oh well. Bye, Washu. If she wakes up, tell her I'm thinking of her, okay?"

"Will do." Washu's expression softened. "I know she'll like that."

Sasami offered a faint smile, then she pushed open the sliding door, stepping out into the hallway as she glanced around her. The nurse she had seen earlier on in the day was still on duty, but aside from that the hallway was deserted, and for a moment she paused beside the heart monitors, running a finger over their smooth surface as she debated whether or not their occasional flashes and bleeps could have accounted for Tokimi's rush of terror.

"Washu did say she was technophobic, so I suppose it could have been." She reflected. "It's not like there's anything like that in her room now, not since she woke up… it probably would have startled her. I need to remember that everything on Jurai is strange to Tokimi at the moment. What seems normal and safe to me might seem really scary to her."

"Sasami-sama, is something wrong?" The nurse approached her at that moment and Sasami turned, flashing the woman a sheepish smile.

"No… I was just thinking." She said with a shrug. "I'm sorry, am I in the way here? I was visiting Tokimi, but she's sleeping now."

“I understand Tokimi-san became quite agitated.” The nurse looked grave. “I heard something earlier, but I was otherwise engaged. Is the young lady quite all right now?”

“Yes. The doctor gave her something to make her sleep.” Sasami nodded. “And she’s quite calm now. I think it just scared her, coming out of her room and seeing so many strange things.”

“I imagine so.” The nurse nodded. “It must seem very alien to her here.”

She pursed her lips, eying the princess keenly. “On that note, I wonder… are you engaged in something this afternoon, Lady Sasami?”

“No.” Sasami frowned. “I was going to take Tokimi out to the flower garden, but obviously now that’s not possible. Why?”

“Well, we have a young patient who could probably stand some company.” The nurse said lightly. “She arrived just this morning with a military escort — the poor child is very shaken up and being surrounded by grown ups is no way to comfort a frightened child. She’s your age or a little older, I think — and she’s been through it rather. I wondered if you could spare a few minutes to visit her.”

“A child?” Sasami stared, then, “Oh, was that who you were with earlier on?”

“Yes, that’s right.” The nurse nodded her head. “Her name is Sakuya Kumashiro, and she and her father were travelling on an envoy ship to Jurai. Her father had a diplomatic engagement with your Lord Uncle, the Emperor.”

“Oh no.” Sasami’s eyes became stricken. “Washu said that a lot of people on that ship were killed! Was her father…?”

She trailed off, and the nurse nodded sadly.

“I’m afraid so, yes.” She agreed gravely. “All of the crew and the passengers on board lost their lives. All except Miss Sakuya. The poor girl is naturally very shocked and doesn’t remember clearly what happened as yet, but what she does know is that her father is gone and she’s miles from her home on Kanemitsu. I’m sure she could use a friend.”

“Then I’ll go and see her, of course.” Sasami nodded her head. “Where is she? Which room?”

“At the far end of the hall, the third door on the right.” The nurse indicated. She smiled, bowing her head to the princess.

“Thank you, Hime-sama. I know she’ll appreciate your company.”

“Well, I hope so.” Sasami looked uncharacteristically grave. “I can’t imagine what it would be like if something happened to Father or Mother. I’ll go there right now.”

Before the nurse could respond, the young princess had turned on her heel, hurrying down the corridor and back past the heart machines as she reached the doorway that her companion had indicated. She hesitated for a moment, then knocked softly on the wooden panels, and after a brief pause a soft voice called for her to come in. Not without misgivings, Sasami slid the panel door back, stepping over the threshold and into the chamber.

A young girl sat in the bed, knees drawn up to her chest in a defensive posture as she stared at the newcomer in apprehension and alarm. Her complexion was ash pale, but suspicious signs of redness about her eyes and cheeks indicated that she had been crying, and immediately Sasami’s heart went out to her. Silky dark hair was brushed back into two tails, short and fluffy at the ends, and as Sasami came to sit down, she realised it gave the girl a very young, innocent look. Two big aquamarine eyes flickered with sadness and confusion, and Sasami was quick to hold out her hand.

“My name is Sasami.” She said simply. “I’ve come to visit you.”

The girl looked startled, staring at her companion, and Sasami smiled ruefully.

“I’m sorry, I guess you’re a bit surprised.” She acknowledged. “Well, I was visiting a friend here, and the nurse told me you were all alone in here. I hope you don’t mind. She thought you might want a friend and I hoped I could help.”

“You can’t help me.” The girl spoke softly, turning her head away and pulling her hand away from Sasami’s reach. “My father is dead… you can’t bring him back.”

Sasami’s eyes became clouded and she nodded, folding her fingers in her lap.

“I know. I’m very sorry.” She said soberly. “It must have been a terrible shock for you.”

“Maybe, if I even remembered what happened.” The girl glanced at her bedcovers, bitterness in her tones. “All I know is that we were on a ship… and then, the next thing I know, I’m curled up in the corner of my cabin and Father and Mr Toyonaga are… are lying on the floor.”

“You were right there?” Shock flickered in Sasami’s crimson eyes. Sakuya nodded. She hesitated, then raised an opaque gaze to the other girl’s.

“You’re *Princess* Sasami.” She realised. “That’s right, isn’t it? Azusa-heika is your Uncle. Father told me about you.”

“That’s right.” Sasami smiled. “And your name is Sakuya… Sakuya Kumashiro. Yes?”

“Yes.” Sakuya acknowledged. She sighed, toying absently with the edge of her bedcovers. “You must think me very rude. I didn’t realise you were the Princess.”

“You’re not rude, and I don’t mind.” Sasami hurried to reassure her. “If I’d been through what you have, I wouldn’t worry about being polite. Please, don’t worry about it.”

“Really?” Sakuya looked surprised, and Sasami nodded, holding out her hand once more.

“I’d like to be your friend.” She said softly. “If you’ll be mine.”

“I…” Sakuya hesitated, glancing at her hand, then shaking her head.

“I’d rather you didn’t touch me.” She murmured. “I… I guess I must have fallen or something, because it hurts when people touch me.”

“Oh… I’m sorry. I didn’t realise.” Sasami looked sheepish. “Well, that’s all right. Will you still be my friend, Sakuya? I know that Uncle will be trying to get a hold of your family on your planet, but until then, I’d like it if we could be. After all, you shouldn’t be all alone, not after what’s happened to you.”

Sakuya stared at her, and for the briefest of instances Sasami saw flickers of something else in the depths of the girl’s aquamarine eyes. For a moment, Tsunami’s magic seared up inside of her, as images of the carnage aboard the Sumire flitted through her head and she swallowed hard, struggling to regain her composure. She drew a deep breath into her lungs, forcing the Goddess’s psychic impulses back as she did so.

Sakuya frowned, and in a second the illusion was broken.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. I’m fine.” Sasami assured her, although inwardly she was still shaken by what she had seen. “Well? Will you be my friend?”

“Do you always do that, on Jurai? Make friends with every waif

and stray that wanders in?" Sakuya asked quietly. Sasami pinkened, nodding her head.

"Pretty much." She agreed self-consciously. "Why… do you think it's a bad thing?"

"No… I suppose not." Sakuya hesitated, then offered a slight smile. "At least you're trying to cheer me up. All your Emperor cares about is what I remember about what happened on the ship. As if he cares that my father and all those people lost their lives."

"I'm sure Uncle cares very much." Sasami said evenly. Sakuya shrugged.

"Not about me. Just about finding out the truth." She said sadly. "What does it matter, anyway? Nobody can bring Father back, after all."

"No, that's true." Sasami agreed slowly. "But at least he can try and stop it happening again, can't he? To other people and other families."

"I only care about *my* family." Sakuya said flatly. Sasami smiled.

"I suppose that's natural." She agreed. "But Uncle will get in touch with them, you know. Then you can go home."

"Yes… perhaps you're right." Sakuya agreed softly. She spread her hands out in front of her, eying them pensively.

"Is Jurai a nice place, Princess Sasami?" She asked at length. Sasami looked startled.

"I think so." She agreed. "Why?"

"Father was wary about coming here. He wasn't sure if it was a good idea." Sakuya said thoughtfully.

"I suppose when important politics are concerned, it's always a bit heavy." Sasami reflected. "But I don't know about those things. My Father won't let me attend council or court hearings until I'm eighteen, and I've only just turned thirteen. So I've a long time to go before I do."

Sakuya fell silent for a moment, digesting this. Then she turned her gaze on her companion once more, offering a faint smile.

"We can be friends, Sasami-hime." She said softly. "I think I would like that very much, while I'm here on Jurai."

Seiryo pushed open the door to his mother's chamber, hesitating as

he saw that his delicate companion was sleeping, then stepping softly into the room, moving to draw the curtains across the glistening panes of expensive Juraian glass. Glancing up at the clock that kept time over the bed, he frowned, his gaze flitting briefly to the slithers of sun that darted in beneath the thick gauze fabric.

"Something troubles you, my son?"

A feeble voice from the bed startled him and he swung around, casting his mother a stricken look.

"Okaa-sama, I'm sorry. Did I wake you? I was trying not to." He said gently, coming to stand at the bedside. "I just came to check on you, that's all — to make sure you were all right."

"Why would you be concerned about that, Seiryo-chan?" Kaede asked softly, extending a thin, fragile hand and slipping it resolutely into her companion's. "It seems a strange whim, even for you — that you'd visit your mother so suddenly in the middle of the day, without any warning at all."

"I know." Seiryo admitted. "I suppose you're right. Something does trouble me — but it's not something that should trouble you."

"You keep many secrets from me these days, my boy." Kaede said reproachfully. "As if you believe me not strong enough to know the truth. I don't like that you hold back from me — you and Suki both, since the death of your father. I am not so frail that I can't give advice or support, you know. My body might be failing me but there is nothing wrong with my mind."

"Oh, I know that." Despite himself, Seiryo offered her a smile, touching her cheek affectionately. "Nobody doubts your wits, Mother. I assure you of that. But since Father's death, I have been so very busy — with one thing and another. And Suki — well, I encourage her to mix more than she did before. She and the Lady Sasami have become such close friends, and I have done nothing to intervene. I think Sasami-sama is having a very positive influence on my little sister. Some days its hard to remember there are years between them — although I haven't fathomed yet whether Sasami is older in spirit or Suki just overly protected for too much of her life."

"These things I know." Kaede shifted herself more comfortably on her pillows, eying Seiryo keenly. "And I too am content with your sister's budding friendships. But there are other things you do not speak of. I wonder if perhaps you have regrets… about the thing I asked of you, when last we spoke in real depth."

“That you asked of me?” Seiryo stared. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Kaede smiled slightly.

“Your father.” She murmured, and comprehension flickered in the nobleman’s malachite eyes. He pursed his lips.

“Mother, whatever you do or don’t believe, I did not kill Father.” He said softly. “I know that was what you asked me to do — albeit not in so many words — and I admit that for a while I did consider the possibility. But his blood is not on my hands. I give you my word. It was not me who ended his life.”

Kaede’s eyes widened with surprise.

“But my son…”

“I suppose fate has a strange way of playing things out, sometimes.” Seiryo said ruefully. “But I’m not a killer, and I’m actually glad of that fact. I can’t explain it to you, Mother, but I don’t think I would have gleaned pleasure from taking his life. Even considering all the things he did to you and Suki and even to me, sending me to the Galaxy Police. Truth is, I wish I was back there now, sometimes. Jurai is stifling, and I didn’t realise how much I loved that life until it was taken away.”

“You could always go back, Seiryo.” Kaede’s gaze softened. “Don’t let me keep you here, if it isn’t what you want.”

“It isn’t only you, Okaa-sama, although you are important to me.” Seiryo looked pensive. “With Father gone, I have the Council and the estate to handle. There’s noone else to do it. And besides, things have changed. I’m not that person any more. Jurai is where I have to stay — and so I do.”

“I see.” Kaede’s eyes flickered thoughtfully. “I am sorry, Seiryo, for believing you capable of your Father’s murder. Especially since it would have been on my say so… we have become dark souls indeed, when we begin to plot the end of another. When you come so close to death, you wonder about those things all the more.”

“Well, you can ease your conscience.” Seiryo told her gently. “Talking about something is not the same as doing it, and neither you nor I are guilty of murder. Father’s death was a tragic accident, and that is the honest truth.”

“Perhaps Tsunami listens more closely than I ever imagined.” Kaede murmured absently. Seiryo looked sceptical.

“Do you believe this all powerful goddess of yours struck him down?” He asked, his tone gently teasing. “I don’t think so. I imagine she has much more important things to worry about than one greedy, gambling drunkard.”

“Perhaps.” Kaede smiled, amused. “You have not changed in those views, then. Somehow I am comforted to see that I still recognise some aspect of my son.”

Seiryo bit his lip, looking self-conscious.

“Why did you come to me today, anyway?” Kaede continued. “It’s not that I mind your visit, but that it was so unexpected… something is on your mind and I might be able to unburden it for you.”

“No… I don’t think so.” Seiryo frowned, shaking his head. “Council business, mostly. The Emperor has sworn his Council to secrecy on the specific details of the matter. Suffice it to say that something has occured of a disturbing nature, not far from Jurai’s orbit. This morning he addressed us asking for our help and support in resolving it, but what we can do seems to be beyond me.”

He sighed.

“I went to the Infirmary to visit the Emperor’s ward Tokimi, just because visiting her usually clears my head.” He added. “But she said something that disturbed me — disturbed a lot of people, actually. It reminded me of something — a time when you and Suki may have been in the greatest danger. So I suppose I came back here, to make sure that nothing had befallen you.”

“On the word of a sick young girl?” Kaede queried. “That seems unusually superstitious for you, Seiryo.”

“I know, but she’s not quite like other people in that respect.” Seiryo said darkly. “Things she’s… *seen* in people before have proven true. So I don’t know what to think. But my mind has been working and I’m very afraid that the two things are connected, Okaa-sama. That what she said and the fate of this ship are linked somehow.”

“You do sound like you should still be with the Galaxy Police, talking that way.” Kaede reproached him, and Seiryo looked rueful.

“Yes, I know.” He admitted. “I suppose it’s become a habit — I’ve spent more of my adult life there than here on Jurai.”

“Well, the Emperor should be glad that he has you working on his side.” Kaede said comfortably. “I know you will make me proud, Seiryo, and resolve this matter if you can.”

Seiryo was silent for a moment, gazing at his hands. Then he nodded.

“I think so.” He agreed. “A friend asked a favour of me a few days ago and I told her I would help, though I’ve been putting it off. However, in light of this, I think it might be important that I go ahead and do as I promised. It might help, in the long run.”

“There. Then it’s all all right, isn’t it?” Kaede asked, and something in her tone made Seiryo realise that to his mother, he was still the hot-headed teenager who had been sent away to join the Galaxy Police. He smiled, squeezing the frail woman’s hand as he stood.

“I will make sure that there is as much security here for you and Suki as I can manage, in case of trouble.” He promised. “And I will look after you both, you know that. But now I must go — I think there is a file that I should take a look at.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

“Is that really as much as you can tell me?”

Ayeka pursed her lips, annoyance flickering in the depths of her ruby eyes as she glared at the unfortunate man on the other end of the connection. “Commander, I realise that you were at something of a personnel disadvantage, but did it occur to you that Jurai might like to be informed about something of that nature?”

“Princess Ayeka, once again, you have my sincerest apologies.” The Galaxy Police commander ran an agitated hand through his thick hair, eying her apprehensively as he did so. “I assure you that we saw no reason to suspect the Sumire was in any danger. In fact, quite the opposite. The envoy ship arrived and was checked and cleared by personnel including myself and two of my most trusted agents. Three more of them were aboard when the incident occured… we did everything that we could to ensure security aboard the ship.”

“And yet you failed to notify either myself or my Lord Emperor that two of your own agents had died in suspicious circumstances mere days before the Sumire arrived at Headquarters?” Ayeka snapped. “Did you not think that that might prove irresponsible, Commander? If we had known that unforseen events had occured at Headquarters, we might have been able to make other arrangements. As it is, my Lord Uncle is engrossed in assuring Kanemitsu that this was not a politically motivated attack and that the Imperial Throne had nothing to do with the unfortunate deaths of their leading diplomat and his posse. As I’m sure you can understand, we’re not at all happy.”

“As I said, Hime-sama, there was no way for us to connect the deaths of Agents Tsunetomo and Hirayama to the departure of the Sumire at that time.” The Commander sighed. “But I take your point that we should have notified Jurai as to our current situation. With the short staffing and the chaos that we experienced, it was overlooked.”

“Tell me again how your agents died, Commander.” Ayeka’s tone was dangerously low, and the Commander bit his lip.

“They had slit throats.” He admitted. Ayeka nodded curtly.

“Kumashiro-san and his aide also had slit throats. And the captain

of the vessel, too." She said quietly. "Would you like to see that as a connection? I realise I'm not a trained agent of the Galaxy Police, but surely even a child could make a correlation between them!"

"Ayeka-sama, what would you have me do?" The Commander sounded tired, and despite herself, Ayeka felt a flash of sympathy for the man who had now lost five of his best agents within a short space of time. She sighed, resting her hands on the unit as she considered.

"Since this crime occured within Jurai's space, and considering the political delicacy of the situation, Jurai will investigate." She said softly. "Neither my Uncle nor I are satisfied that the Galaxy Police are capable of resolving this matter without our help, so we are taking control of the case and our people will deal with apprehending a culprit."

"Ayeka-sama…"

"In the light of this, I am asking you to forward all relevant data to Jurai." Ayeka cut across him, holding up her hand to warn him against further interruptions. "And by all, I include the suspicious deaths of Agents Tsunetomo and Hirayama and anything that might possibly connect to it. In order to carry out a full and comprehensive enquiry, we will need that information and as soon as possible. Our people will be examining the Sumire for clues later today. If you could transfer the data before then, I would be most obliged."

She paused, then,

"Am I understood?"

"Yes, Princess. I understand." The Commander let out a heavy sigh. "I'll see to it that the relevant files are sent directly to Jurai."

"Thank you." Ayeka nodded curtly. "Then that terminates this transmission. Do not let me down with this matter, Commander. Enough lives have already been lost. Jurai, over and out."

She flipped her hand across the switch, sinking back in her chair as the monitor flickered to black, whirring and folding up out of sight as it did so.

"Damn the arrogance of the Galaxy Police." She muttered, rubbing her temples as she did so. "It's all very well saying that I speak with hindsight, but even so, two brutal murders should not have been concealed when we had entrusted them with such an important mission. And damn it, with Kiyone here on Jurai I don't even have anyone on base there who can find out some relevant information for me. Mihoshi's a lost cause in that department, unfortunately. We'll

just have to make do with whatever that Commander sends us."

"Are you all right, Ayeka?"

Tenchi's voice cut across her musings and she glanced up, sending him a rueful smile as he approached the dais.

"You look like someone's just piled a load of work on your shoulders." The Prince commented, and Ayeka grimaced, nodding her head.

"That would be an understatement." She acknowledged. "I'm glad of a friendly face, if you want the truth. You always did have the best timing, Tenchi."

"Glad to be of service." Tenchi laughed. "Although I was actually looking for your Uncle."

"Well, if you are planning on discussing your news with him, I would find a better time." Ayeka sighed. "Have you heard about the ship from Kanemitsu? You must have. Rumours of disaster have spread all over the court already, even though all the members of the Holy Council have been sworn to secrecy where the details are concerned."

"I understood a ship had met with some kind of catastrophe, but I don't know the details." Tenchi shook his head. "What about it?"

"What about it indeed." Ayeka groaned. "Four months ago, Tenchi, my Uncle began negotiations of a significant kind with one of our outpost planets — a planet called Kanemitsu. It lies towards the boundary of Jurai's territory, and there have always been disputes about their right to free trade and independant government. A settlement had been reached, and so Kanemitsu sent a party of diplomats to Jurai to finalise the agreement. That ship was due to dock here on Jurai two days ago. Unfortunately, the ship became delayed… and yesterday my Uncle received word that distress signals had been picked up by one of our military centres. Upon further investigation, the crew and passengers of the ship were discovered to be dead… all except one young girl, who seems to have hidden from the events as they unfolded."

"Oh my." Tenchi looked horrified. "They were murdered?"

"So it would seem, although we don't know who by or why." Ayeka buried her head in her hands. "Tenchi, the military did a cursitory search of the ship when they retrieved the young girl and brought her to Jurai. They didn't find anything that was strikingly unusual — or any way a killer might have entered or left the ship. Kanemitsu are

furious — they suspect Juraian complicity — and I've just discovered that the Galaxy Police concealed some very important information from us. Information that might have helped prevent this, at the very least. On top of that, in less than a week is our quarterly council Gathering, where the Palace will play host to pretty much every noble family for an evening supposedly of celebration. While we're knee deep in murder."

"Ugh." Tenchi came to sit beside her, putting a sympathetic hand on her arm. "You really do have your hands full."

"Well, I know." Ayeka raised her gaze to his, comforted somewhat by what she saw there. "And I'm sorry to burden you with it too, Tenchi, but right now I think I need to."

"It's all right. That's what friends are for, after all." Tenchi said simply, and Ayeka nodded, a wistful look entering her red eyes.

"Yes. It is." She agreed absently. "Any road, it now lies with us to resolve this case and find out what happened to those people. It occured within Jurai space, so it is effectively our jurisdiction… and judging by the botch the Galaxy Police have made so far, we *need* to become involved. That being the case, I've strong-armed the Galaxy Police Commander into turning the matter over to us in its entirety, including any and all records and evidence they may have correlated there in the meantime. After all, Kanemitsu need to see that we're taking action. But so far the young girl that the military rescued is too shocked to really speak to anyone seriously about this. In any case, she claims not to remember what happened and frustrating as that is, it seems probable. After all, the mind does have ways of concealing horrific moments."

"Poor kid." Tenchi said pensively. "What was she doing aboard?"

"Her father was the head of the diplomatic party." Ayeka shrugged. "It seems he brought her along as an indication of Kanemitsu's peaceful intent."

"I see. That makes it doubly tricky, doesn't it?"

"You said it." Ayeka agreed.

"And the Galaxy Police? They're involved?"

"Well, I don't think they're complicit any more than I believe Uncle ordered those people to be killed, but they did have an incident there some days ago that they failed to notify us of." Ayeka sighed heavily. "Not that it's normal practice to tell Jurai their every problem, but considering the nature of the Kanemitsu ship's mission, I still see this

as an oversight. Two of the Elite agents were murdered in cold blood and dumped in one of the detective's offices. The style of murder was very similar to that aboard the Sumire… it occurs to me that this might be a much bigger conspiracy than it first appears."

"You mean that Kanemitsu sent agents to do this and then blame it on Jurai, so they had a springboard for further political demands?"

"Or a civil coup… I did think of it." Ayeka grimaced. "It's so muddling, knowing who is on who's side and which people are telling you the truth. Either way, though, the matter must be settled and it must be done so before anyone else is hurt."

"Is there something I can do to help?" Tenchi offered. Ayeka gazed at him in surprise, and he smiled sheepishly, running his fingers through his thick hair.

"Well, you seem so wound up, and I'd like to." He replied. "Ryoko and I are freewheeling here, really — aside from conveying our news, we're rather spare parts. There must be something we can do?"

"I don't know, although I appreciate the gesture more than you know." Ayeka groaned. "Right at this moment we're waiting for the Galaxy Police to transmit their data about the deaths of their officers. And of course, I must organise people to investigate the Sumire itself. Uncle is so wrapped up in pandering to Kanemitsu's irate parliament that he's had to delegate that to me… and I'd like to not mess it up, if possible. It might be stupid, but I do feel I'm a little bit on trial… after all, one day, this will be my job and noone else's."

"Well, then let me go and look at the ship for you." Tenchi suggested.

"You?" Ayeka stared, and Tenchi nodded.

"Sure. Why not? In fact, Ryoko and I could both go — I'm sure she'd like an adventure out in space, and she's not easily scared." He replied. "And you know you can trust the both of us to tell you the truth, right?"

"Yes, that is true." Ayeka agreed. "But Tenchi, it might be horrible aboard that ship. The military coroner has already claimed those bodies found aboard, to carry out post-mortem investigations and to arrange for the lost souls to be returned to their home planet. But they haven't cleaned anything up… there might be blood and… well, it probably won't be too pretty."

"Possibly not." Tenchi acknowledged. "But I'd still like to do something to take the pressure off you. Both Ryoko and I are strong

enough to be prepared in case of any danger, you know that. And you said you were worried about who was on who's side… this way you know that people who are on *your* side are looking into things."

"Yes, I suppose so." Ayeka smiled faintly. "Very well, Lord Tenchi. If Ryoko agrees, then I accept your offer. It would be nice not to have to read between the lines of a report in case there's any hidden agendas lurking in the shadows. It would be much appreciated if you would take this task on."

"Then it's settled. I'll speak to Ryoko right away." Tenchi promised. "And she's bored, so I know she'll play along. You just let us know what you want us to do and when, and we'll be ready."

"Washu?"

Kiyone pushed open the door of the chamber, stopping dead as she registered the room's sole occupant. Cold fingers seemed to clamp themselves around her heart, and she drew breath sharply, her grip on the door handle tightening as she fought to retain her composure. Of all people she had expected to find on her pilgrimage to Washu's temporary, makeshift lab-base, he had been the last one on her mind and despite herself, she found herself annoyed for not anticipating his presence sooner. After all, she acknowledged bitterly to herself, Washu had asked him to look at her file.

"Detective Makibi." Seiryo, it seemed, was equally as startled, and for a moment he just stared at her in ungarded dismay. Then he seemed to get a firm hold of his emotions, shaking his head as he got slowly to his feet.

"I'll come back." He said quietly. "Clearly you have business to discuss with Lady Washu when she returns and I wouldn't want to intrude."

"No… no, wait." Kiyone forced another breath into her lungs, trying to control her shaking body as she stepped into the room, pushing the door shut behind her with more than a few misgivings. "Did you… have you managed to look at… Did Washu ask you…?"

"About your file?" Seiryo asked softly. Kiyone nodded mutely, and Seiryo sighed, rubbing his temples.

"I've taken a quick look." He said gravely. "Since Lady Washu seemed to think it was of some importance, although I'm not sure that I want to take it much further. It's heavily encrypted, and really not the kind of file you — or any of the regular division — should ever be

trying to break into. If nothing else you would be in breach of security, and for another, you'd be contravening several space laws by even trying."

"So you won't help us?" Kiyone murmured. Seiryo eyed her keenly, and at his scrutinous gaze, Kiyone blushed, dropping her eyes.

"I don't think you really want me involved." He said matter-of-factly. "I know how you feel about me and I understand why. Besides, I'm sure that there is plenty we both have to do. You are — if I understand Lady Washu correctly — on holiday. And I have responsibility to my Emperor — even more so since he appears to be struggling to keep the colonists at bay."

Kiyone stared at him, her fear forgotten for a moment as she struggled to absorb his words. Then her eyes narrowed, as a sudden surge of anger flooded through her senses. This was the man who had driven her from her work, and who had haunted her dreams and her thoughts on and off since the attack aboard Yagami six months before. This was the cause of her problems, the reason why she had not felt the same about anything since that day — and suddenly rage replaced fear in her mind. She stalked forward, grabbing up the black box off Washu's desk and thrusting it out towards him, eyes glinting with indignation.

"No. That's not going to do." She said in low tones, her voice trembling slightly as her pent up emotions finally found an outlet. "You listen to me, Seiryo Tennan. You don't get out of this that easily. You're the main reason I'm stuck here, away from Headquarters, do you realise that? I'm not on 'holiday'. Because of you I can't carry out my job and I've been discharged of my duties under the suspicion of mental instability. I'm sick and tired of you dominating and dictating everything I think or feel and I'm not going to stand for it any more. And if you really are sorry for what you did to me aboard Yagami six months ago, you can damn well start by unencrypting these files!"

Seiryo gaped at her for a moment, but she gave him no chance to respond, banging the recorder down on the desk and advancing on him.

"I have spent far too long being afraid of you." She spat out, pushing him roughly across the chest and he stumbled backwards into his chair. "You took away from me my self control, my pride, and my ability to handle situations coolly and calmly. Because of you, I might never be all right again. They might never let me back into the force. Because of what you did to me, the chief now thinks I'm unstable enough to vandalise my own spaceship and this damn file is the only

thing that might be able to clear my name! Nobody will listen to me, because you turned me into some kind of freak show and I hate it. *I hate it!* I'm fed up with it and it's going to stop right here and right now. Do you understand me? *Right now*!"

She drew a deep breath into her lungs, realising that she was physically shaking with anger and her companion eyed her in stricken silence, digesting her words. Then he sighed heavily, turning his attention towards the computer screen.

"I think you've been waiting to say that to me for quite some time, haven't you, Detective?" He asked softly.

Somehow the calm, almost penitent manner of his response broke through Kiyone's rush of emotion and as the anger and hatred seeped out of her she felt suddenly weary, sinking down into a vacant chair and burying her head in her hands.

"I'm fed up." She repeated. "Just that. Fed up."

"You're not the only one." Seiryo said simply. "Detective Makibi, I can't answer any of the charges you just levelled at me. Like as not they're all true, and I know that apologising to you would do nothing to change the things you're experiencing. Still, I am sorry. Even if you don't believe me, or if it isn't enough just to hear me say that. I was… not myself that night. However, that is no excuse. I compromised your safety and your position as well as my own and it was wrong. You're not the only one who remembers. It bothers me too."

"I…" Kiyone faltered, thrown off guard as she gazed at him uncertainly. Seiryo spread his hands.

"I'm deeply ashamed of what happened aboard Yagami." He said quietly. "You were burned by Tokimi's magic. I was scarred by it. We're not so different, really. We're both trying to forget."

Kiyone bit her lip, running her gaze over her companion as she did so. For the first time she saw the mixture of emotions in his sharp teal eyes, and the tired lines that ran across his brow. His complexion was paler than she remembered, and the realisation surprised her. Her eyes narrowed as she digested this new information, processing it as if she was eying up a suspect in a case. Then, at length, she let out a heavy sigh.

"Maybe Washu is right." She said softly. "That it has damaged you, too. I didn't think it was possible… for so long I've pictured you as a monster in my dreams. Someone who came to finish me… I've never been so afraid as I was that night, because I knew you came for me

and I really thought… I thought… I thought that was it. But… but Washu said that you had suffered a lot since the magic was ripped out of you. I didn't really believe that you could have had it as bad as me. But maybe you have… haven't you?"

Seiryo smiled drolly.

"I did say you were a fine detective, Miss Makibi." He said ruefully. "I'm all right. I lived to tell the tale, and I kept my wits. I've been forced to swallow my pride and face my own weaknesses head on for the first time in my life. It has not been pleasant, no. But I've survived it. And so have you… since here you are, determined to crack a difficult case despite the attitude of your superior officer. I seem to remember that you're something of a rule breaker when it suits you, Detective. I'm going to assume that this is one of those times."

"Maybe it is." Kiyone admitted. "But I'm not crazy. Maybe I am stressed. Perhaps I have had post-traumatic incidents and maybe I do need to face up to that and deal with it head on. But I'm doing so, right now. I'm sitting in the same room as someone I've spent six months being terrified of. And I'm damn well going to make him help me, regardless of how freaked out it makes me to do so. Because I need this — I need closure on all of this stuff. Not just this case, but everything. I'm fed up of being a coward and a chicken and I'm not going to let this beat me any more. You're going to help us crack this file, Agent Tennan. And I'm not going to run screaming for cover this time. It's too important."

"I'm not Agent anything any more, you know."

"I know." Kiyone admitted. "But…"

She faltered, blushing.

"I don't want to call you Lord." She confessed. "You tried to kill me. I'm not sure I can give you that respect just yet."

"Then don't." Seiryo dismissed her discomfort with a flick of his fingers. "You know my name, and I have no objection to you using it."

He smiled ruefully.

"After all, as you say, Lord is a bit optimistic, considering our history. And I think I would feel all the worse for hearing it from you, in light of that."

Kiyone was silent for a moment, her gaze flitting to the small black box that sat on the unit.

"Do you think… is it something you can decode?" She asked

quietly. “The file, I mean. Is it possible… do you know how?”

“I was trained in high level encryption and code breaking, yes.” Seiryo agreed. “I was quite good at it, once upon a time. I’m fairly sure that I can break into the file — but you have to realise that you’re taking a big risk by doing this. We both are, when it comes down to it. I’m no more authorised than you are to implement the skills I learnt in the Elite Forces and handle what is obviously top secret information.”

“I know. But I want to know, anyway.” Kiyone said frankly. “It’s about more than top secret Elite protocol. It’s about the safety of people’s lives… and honestly, my sanity, too. Those things matters more to me right now. As it stands, I might never get back to HQ anyway. I’ve thought and thought and Washu and I have discussed it, too. The only thing that I took from that Seniwan ship were the files Washu recovered on my data recorder, so that must be what this killer was looking for, when they raided my ship. And that being so, it has to be important.”

Seiryo shrugged, eying her thoughtfully for a moment. Then

“Honestly, I’m also of the opinion that it might be important.” He agreed. “Though in what sense I think we’ve yet to find out.”

He turned, keying in a combination on Washu’s computer and sitting back as data digits filled the screen. Hesitantly, and not without misgivings, Kiyone came to stand behind him, staring at the mixture of letters and numbers with growing frustration.

“How can any of that make sense?” She demanded. “It’s random and haphazard… it doesn’t follow any pattern at all!”

“On the contrary, it does.” Seiryo’s eyes narrowed as he ran his finger thoughtfully across the screen. “A very clear, concise pattern, if a slightly unusual one.”

“I don’t see it.” Kiyone objected. “I might not have had the Elite training, Tennan-san, but I know that to crack an encryption you look for most used letters and work it out from there. But there’s no kind of logic like that in this. It just doesn’t make any sense.”

“That’s because it probably isn’t encoded from Common Galactic Tongue.” Seiryo said quietly. “Most agents don’t use that for coding, because it’s so widely spoken and therefore so easy to crack.”

He shrugged.

“This might be just a wild hunch, but there’s only one language I know of that uses a vowel structure quite like this, and which could be

logically substituted into this kind of a coding system."

"And I suppose it's a language you can read?" Kiyone demanded. Seiryo nodded.

"Every child from every noble family of this planet can read it." He said simply. "At first glance I'd say its basis is Old Era Juraian."

"Then can you read what it says?"

"No… not yet." Seiryo shook his head. "Even if I am right and that is the foundation, it's been encrypted and I still have to decode it. I told you, it's just my hunch. It looks vaguely like a couple of styles I once saw when I was still at the Academy — there's a similar design to the way it's been laid out. That's all… we're still a long way from knowing what it says."

"I see." Kiyone bit her lip, then, "Old Era Juraian? How sure are you of that?"

"I can't be one hundred percent, but it seems likely to me."

"But…" Kiyone frowned, shaking her head. "Wait a minute. This ship was Seniwan. Not Juraian. I know they are allies now, but that doesn't make any sense. Why would a top secret Juraian file be encrypted onto a Seniwan ship… and why would that Seniwan ship then claim to be from Shitori? Are you really that sure? Because I'm not seeing a connection here."

"That's your connection." Seiryo tapped a series of digits that made up the bottom row of the screen. "Agent Kuramitsu. Mihoshi-san's father, yes?"

"Yes, but I…"

"I knew Agent Kuramitsu once, when I was in my final year at the Academy." Seiryo mused. "He was brilliant — very successful and a role model that many Elite trainees aspired to. His record within the division was second to none. These characters here are his own particular logo — which also makes me even more confident I'm right about the language.He was the expert I mentioned — the one who trained me. Encryption was his speciality — he was the source of the other ciphers I studied that look rather similar to this one. It is unusual enough that a coincidence seems unlikely. Kuramitsu-san didn't train many Elite hopefuls — I was one of the lucky ones. There are very few people who would even begin to be able to decode his scripts, if he chose not to let them."

"Poor Mihoshi… she really didn't take after her Dad." Kiyone

sighed. “Okay, so? What has that to do with a Juraian file and a Seniwan ship?”

“The Kuramitsu family are Seniwan. Presumably you know that, since you’re closely aligned with Mihoshi-san.” Seiryo said thoughtfully. “But Agent Kuramitsu did most of his specialist work in this sector — around and encompassing Jurai. He had the ear of the royal family, from time to time — that’s why he trained only those of us who he felt had the highest potential for the discipline. He was very busy and didn’t have time to spend flitting idly around the Academy. That being so, it seems perfectly logical to me that something which bears his stamp should be written in Old Era Juraian. There aren’t many outside the noble class of Jurai who would be able to read it in its original format, so encrypted it makes it even more difficult to crack. He was fluent in it, of course, but then top level agents often do speak and read more than one language, for encryption purposes.”

“And the Seniwans onboard the ship? What of them?”

“If it was something that the Kuramitsu family were involved in, no doubt there was some long term agreement that Seniwan representatives would remain involved so long as the case needed investigation or monitoring.” Seiryo said with a shrug. “It’s a fairly normal procedure when dealing with the messy machinations of high society, and Seniwa and Jurai have been diplomatic friends for quite some generations now. But whatever this file is, it’s a big deal case. Something which Agent Kuramitsu went to a lot of trouble to keep a secret.”

“Something involving Jurai?” Kiyone asked. Seiryo nodded.

“Seems that way.” He agreed. “But the main page only says his name and the details of the case in terms of numbers and computer files and other documents it relates to. I’d need more time to get into the main body of the file because I suspect I’d need an Elite pass key and my own is no longer valid… providing it would even work on this kind of file. Kuramitsu-san would not have wanted just anyone to get into it. He would have made sure only the ones who needed to know could know.”

“Wait a minute.” Kiyone slid her hand into her pocket, pulling out the pass key she had taken from the woman aboard the ship. “Is this any use? I found it on the ship too, when I took that information. It belonged to one of the dead crew. I know there’s no slot to put it in, but could you work with it?”

“If Washu-sama could pull a code from it, then yes.” Seiryo took the small, flat device, glancing at it, then handing it back. “You really were bad on board that ship, weren’t you?”

“I wanted to help those people.” Kiyone said flatly. “They were murdered and I wanted them to get justice.”

“You really should be an Elite, you know. You’d make a fine one.” Seiryo observed absently.

Kiyone flushed red at the compliment, and her companion smiled.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to make you more uncomfortable than you already are.” He added. “But I do tend to speak as I find.”

He sat back in the chair, folding his arms across his chest.

“I’ve almost missed this.” He added ruefully, a sheepish expression flickering into his teal eyes. “Stupid as it seems, I’ve resented being so tied to Jurai since I resigned my commission and accepted that my future was here. The Galaxy Police has been a big part of my life and everything I achieved there, I did under my own steam. It seems a shame that it had to end the way it did.”

“That’s why I’m so determined to clear my name and overturn my Commander’s opinion of my sanity.” Kiyone said grimly. “Because the Galaxy Police is my world and I don’t want to quit. It’s where I belong and I won’t let them take that away from me.”

“Even if it means working with a monster like me?” Seiryo raised quizzical teal eyes to hers and she flushed again, nodding her head.

“Even so.” She agreed quietly. “Just don’t touch me, and we’ll be fine.”

“Contrary to your belief, Kiyone-san, I don’t go around touching women without their permission.” Seiryo said drolly. “I told you — aboard Yagami, I was not myself.”

“Perhaps. But still, keep it in mind.” Kiyone said stiffly. “Just because you’re helping doesn’t mean I entirely trust you yet.”

“That’s fair enough.” Seiryo acknowledged. He frowned, rubbing his temples.

“I wish I had access to the Unko.” He admitted. “This process would be a lot easier if I could get hold of my decoder keys and run this through the ship’s own program. As it is…”

“As it is?”

“It may take me a couple of days to get through all of the diversions.” Seiryo frowned. “I do have other duties too, and I can’t just sit down here and stare at the screen for hours.”

He rubbed his temples again.

“If nothing else, staring at it for too long is giving me a headache.” He admitted.

Kiyone frowned.

“I guess the Unko is still in Imperial custody?” She asked softly. Seiryo nodded, turning away from the computer screen.

“Yes.” He agreed, and Kiyone noticed a slightly bitter edge to his tone. “Indefinitely, until Azusa-heika decides I’m allowed to have it back again. It’s in Takeru’s custody, to be exact… and I have to pay for it’s docking and upkeep although I have no right to set foot aboard it.”

“Don’t you mean *Lord* Takeru?” Kiyone asked, a little cattily. Seiryo grimaced.

“As you say.” He acknowledged. “Lord or not, he has custody of my ship and therefore my decoder keys.”

“And Headquarters didn’t confiscate those when you quit?”

“Not theirs to confiscate.” Seiryo shook his head. “Unko is a top of the line ship, Detective Makibi. It was made to fit my specifications and as I advanced in the Force, so I added bits and pieces as I needed them. It’s probably the most powerful and the most versatile craft it could be, now. Its software is cutting edge — including the very latest in encryption and decoding programs.”

“But there’s no way you can get to it?”

“Not unless I want to be arrested and thrown into a cell.” Seiryo said blackly. “I’m sorry, but that’s not an experience I’m ready to repeat.”

Kiyone frowned.

“I suppose not.”

“I can work on them manually, but it will take longer.” Seiryo sighed. “That’s the best I can offer you. If you want me involved, then that’s going to have to be it.”

“I suppose that will have to do.” Kiyone said heavily. “At least you can crack it, and that’s more than I can do on my own. Washu said she

would probably be able to get her way into it but it might take her even longer to discover the exact nature of the encryption and to get through each of the security codes. You've got through one or two of them just by opening it up, so I guess your way probably is quicker. I just…"

She hesitated, then,

"Well, this is important. So that's what we'll have to do." She added at length. "If… if you will."

"I will." Seiryo nodded solemnly. "If for no other reason than to see if my brain is still functioning on all cylinders. And besides, if you're willing to put your neck on the line to resolve this, well, it's probably worth resolving. I'm familiar with your case history and your own legendary hunches. I'm willing to go with this one, since you seem to be so keen on digging around."

"What do you mean, my legendary hunches?" Kiyone blushed, looking wary as he offered her a slight smile.

"Cracking a serial looter out of prison to help bring to heel one of the most notorious pirates ever known?" He said softly. "Following the Lady Ayeka and her sister even when her own planet had cast them out? I'm sure there are many more times when you've let your instinct override your orders, and that's a quality that the force needs to utilise more. That's why you need to undertake the Elite training, Detective Makibi. You'll find you can work far more off your own impulses, and far less to the orders of a superior officer. They trust you to undertake your duties without needing a chaperone. It's quite liberating."

"And it gives you the opportunity to attempt murder on your fellow officers." Kiyone said coolly, watching as her companion flinched at her words. He sent her a dark look, getting to his feet.

"Listen." He said quietly, distress flickering in his eyes as despite herself she took a step away from him. "I know you hate me and I understand why you do. But if you want me to work with you, you have to give a little ground here as well. You can think what you like of me. I don't care. But I can't focus on anything if you're going to constantly bring that up and throw it in my face."

"I'll remember that the next time I wake up in a cold sweat after having another nightmare." Kiyone shot back, and Seiryo's brows drew together in irritation.

"And if I sleep at all tonight, it will be little short of a miracle." He

snapped. “I’ve already brought on one of my headaches to help you in your cause. I’m trying to assist you and I’m doing it because if I do, maybe I’ll stop waking up in the morning with a bad taste in my mouth and evil pictures flitting through my mind. You’re not the only one looking for closure, Detective Makibi. I think it’s time you realised that, victim you may have been, but you weren’t the only one who paid a high price for the events aboard Yagami.”

Kiyone stared at him, speechless, and he shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ll take the disk.” He added. “I’ll look at it and see what I can discover — it strikes me there’s something more to this and I need to find out what it is. If you want to find me, speak to Lady Washu. She seems to be remarkably adept at tracking my movements, and it might be better for both of us if we don’t spend too much time face to face. The last thing I want to do is cause you further distress, and for the sake of my own sanity, I think I’d rather deal with as few of your guilt trips as possible.”

“Seiryo-san…”

“Good afternoon, Detective Makibi.” Seiryo cut across her mildly, hitting a button on the computer and scooping up the disk in his hands. “I’ll be in touch.”

With that he was gone, and, as the door of the laboratory swung shut behind him, Kiyone found she was alone in the compact, dimly lit room. She frowned, chewing on her lip as she reflected on the conversation. To her dismay, she found that she felt somewhat guilty.

“But what have I got to be guilty about?” She wondered. “I was the one who almost died. Sure, he got burned by the magic and it’s probably not been nice. But noone tried to kill him. I don’t get it. Why should I feel guilty about speaking my mind? He’s just another spoiled nobleman of Jurai and if he can’t handle someone talking to him straight…”

She faltered, sinking down into the empty seat and pushing the disk drive shut with a half-hearted flick of her fingers.

“But he is helping me, and he doesn’t have to. He could report me, and he’s putting his own status even more at risk by doing this.” She acknowledged. “Perhaps that’s it. I don’t know what to think of him any more. Whether to hate him as a monster, or pity him as a fellow victim or… or what. It’s confusing. But at least I didn’t lose control of my wits this time. I might have got a little mad and lost my temper with him, but at least that’s better than crying like a little girl and running for cover. So I guess I’ve moved on. That’s a good sign,

anyway."

"Talking to yourself is probably less so, however."

Washu's voice made her jump and she swung around sheepishly, casting her friend a rueful smile as she nodded her head.

"True." She agreed. "But sometimes it's just not possible to reason everything out inside your head."

"No." Washu looked thoughtful. "Did I see Seiryo Tennan coming from this chamber? Or did I imagine that?"

"No..he was here." Kiyone acknowledged, and Washu raised an eyebrow.

"With you?"

"Yes. With me."

"And you were all right with that?"

"Not sure." Kiyone admitted. "I yelled at him rather. But he has looked at the file and he will help. You were right to ask him about it, Washu. He looked at the cover page and told me right away that it was encrypted from Old Era Juraian. More, that it was something to do with Mihoshi's father and therefore it probably is tied up with Jurai and not Seniwa at all. He's taken the disk copy with him, to try and work on it in his own time. He did say it might take a day or two — but that's better than nothing, right?"

"Yes." Washu looked pensive. "Well. And I thought keeping the two of you apart would be better, but obviously there's something to be said for facing your demons head on. You seem more yourself, my friend. Less on edge… less afraid. I'm glad to see it."

"I'm not sure what I am right now." Kiyone groaned. "I feel bad, Washu… like I said something to hurt his feelings. Which is mental, because I really don't care about his feelings. He tried to kill me and I can't forgive that. It's just… things he said…"

"You need to stop fixating on Seiryo-sama as a monster who only means people harm." Washu said gravely. "Listen, Kiyone. I wasn't kidding you when I said he was rehabilitating as much as you are. He's very good at concealing his emotions — from what his sister's said, he's always been good at that — so it's not always clear what he's thinking or feeling. But this business with you has him badly upset. When I saw him during Sasami's Seijin No Hi celebration, he was relaxed and in good humour. But the other night, after his encounter with you, he was on edge and agitated. He even snapped at

me."

"That's the thing. I guess I am realising that, in some weird way." Kiyone admitted reluctantly. "It's been easier to hate him as the villain of the piece. But he's helping me, now. And I feel like I said something really wrong… even though I was the one who almost ended up dying."

"True. But in a sense, that's all you have to deal with." Washu said wisely.

"Meaning what, exactly?" Kiyone bristled at this, indignation flickering in her blue eyes.

"Meaning that whilst it was a horrible experience for you, you have nothing else to contend with." Washu spoke carefully. "You've been through a lot and I'm not undermining that. But in one way, you only have to recover from being assaulted. Seiryo has to recover from more than just a random, if violent attack on his life. He has to deal with the fact that he *committed* such a crime and he's a proud man — that doesn't sit well with him or his conscience at all. He's had to deal with the censure and ridicule of his fellow peers, some of whom still believe — erroneously — that he murdered his late father in his pursuit of Juraian influence. He's had to see his family tainted by his actions — when he only became involved with Tokimi with the intention of protecting that family from harm. And most of all, he's had to recover from what Tokimi's magic did to him. You were burnt by it once. He was infested by it continuously for days together — even weeks."

"And Kii magic can truly have that deep an impact on someone?"

"Kiyone, if Seiryo wasn't as strong a person as he is, I doubt he would have come through it at all." Washu said gravely. "And if you doubt me, you only have to see the childlike way my sister now views the world around her. Nothing but Kii magic did that to her. Besides, you know from your own experience that the emotional side effects are intense. He hasn't said as much to me, but I imagine that at times he walked a fine line between sanity and mental breakdown — even between living and losing the will to do so. It's a terrible thing, Kii magic, in the hands of those who cannot handle it."

Kiyone bit her lip, a stricken look touching her blue eyes as she considered this.

"He said I had brought on his headaches, and that it would be better for his sanity if he didn't spend too much time with me." She remembered softly. "Do you really think that what he went through

was bad enough for him to want to, well, *kill* himself over?"

"No… not Lord Tennan." Washu said with certainty. "But a lesser man? Maybe."

Kiyone sighed.

"Now I'm even more confused." She admitted.

Washu frowned, a troubled look entering her green eyes.

"Me, too." She agreed absently. "Kiyone, if only Lord Tennan was the biggest problem we had to worry about right now. Tell me, do you know anything about a diplomatic ship called the Sumire?"

"No." Kiyone frowned, shaking her head. "Why? Should I?"

"No, probably not." Washu bit her lip. "It was sent from Kanemitsu on a diplomatic mission, with a Galaxy Police escort, but something happened to the people on board. Apparently some of the victims had slit throats… and the killer left no sign of entrance or exit."

"Slit…" Kiyone paled, putting a hand to her neck, and Washu nodded her head.

"Yes. I made the connection, too." She agreed. "Azusa and his Council have been in something of a flap about it, from all accounts."

"The Council?" Kiyone looked surprised. "But then… why didn't Ag… Lo… Tennan-san mention it? I mean, he must have seen the connection as soon as I mentioned the Seniwan ship!"

"Likely he did, and I suspect it probably explains his sudden attentiveness to your request." Washu said astutely. Kiyone frowned, clenching her fists.

"Then why didn't he *tell* me? He said he was helping me — why didn't he give me the whole truth?"

"I imagine the Council has been sworn to secrecy. It's a matter of some political delicacy."

"Then how do you know about it?"

"I was with Azusa when the news came in." Washu shrugged carelessly. "That's how."

"I see." Kiyone bit her lip. "So you think that there *is* a correlation?"

"Well, logic tells me there has to be." Washu agreed sadly. "Although I don't know what a Seniwan spy ship and a diplomatic

ship from Kanemitsu would have in common."

"The Galaxy Police." Kiyone murmured. "You just said the Kanemitsu ship had a Police escort, didn't you? And Mihoshi and I boarded the Seniwan ship in the original instance, which must have sparked off what happened to my poor ship."

"But *why*? What possible purpose could that have?" Washu looked frustrated. "It doesn't make sense."

"Did you tell the Emperor about the Tsubasa?"

"No, not in so many words, although I'm wondering if I — or rather *you* — should." Washu admitted. "Since more people have died than just the three Seniwan officers aboard that ship. But it's up to you."

"I'll get into trouble, if people know I'm hacking files." Kiyone bit her lip. "I say we wait and see what… what *he* turns up, with his decoding. Hopefully then he'll bother to tell us the whole truth, instead of just bits and pieces. When we know what kind of file we're dealing with, then we'll think about Lord Azusa. After all, I really don't know anything about the Sumire… and I don't really know much else, either. Just that those people died, that's all."

"Yes, I know." Washu looked troubled. "All right, we'll play it that way. But let's hope Seiryo-sama picks something up quickly. Whatever this thing is, it's drawing closer and closer to Jurai, and it strikes me that that file of yours is the only thing it could possibly be looking for."

"I agree." Kiyone swallowed hard. "Nevertheless, we have to see this through, Washu."

"And we will." Washu eyed her keenly. "Let's just hope we can crack it before it — whatever *it* is — manages to reach Jurai!"

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

"You know, Tenchi, you sure do think of romantic places for us to spend time together in."

As she pushed back the door to the stationary Sumire, Ryoko turned to send her companion a rueful grimace. Tenchi offered her a sheepish smile, shrugging his shoulders.

"Well, you did say you were bored." He reminded her. "And you are the one who doesn't like ordinary, run of the mill dates. Besides, you should have seen Ayeka when I walked in on her in the Throne Room. She really looked at the end of her tether — I didn't think you'd mind if we helped her."

"No, I suppose not." Ryoko reflected, looping her arms absently around his neck as she watched the Juraian military team shut off the walkway that linked the ship to the restricted docking bay. "Well, I suppose I should take it as a good thing that we *are* alone together and even if it is one of the weirdest places you've invited me, you did at least think to do so."

"Ryoko, people died on this ship." Tenchi reminded her softly. "Don't flirt with me here… please. It's… well… it just isn't right."

"Oh, you are so silly sometimes." Ryoko sighed, loosing her grip with an amount of reluctance. "They're not here now — the military have long since taken them away. Don't be so squeamish — it's not like I'm going to seduce you up here."

"Considering that the military people gave us these, I'm glad to hear it." Tenchi said darkly, reaching up to touch the thin black band that encircled his brow. In the centre, a glittering dot gave away the presence of a miniscule portable camera and as he fumbled with the side of the device, he switched the camera on. "They — and Ayeka — want to see a thorough view of the inside of this ship. Not what kind of underwear you're wearing."

"Perhaps I'm not wearing any." Ryoko bantered back, extending a lazy finger to follow his example. "You'll never know, now."

"Ryoko." Tenchi rolled his eyes, but there was a glimmer of a smile at the edges of his lips. "All right. Enough. I'm going to switch on my

communicator, and I don't think Ayeka wants to hear this kind of talk."

"No, probably not." Ryoko admitted. "Even if she is over you, I guess she's too prim and proper for some of the things we've been known to do."

"Ryoko, it's going on now." Tenchi said warningly, flicking the microphone to 'on'. "So behave."

"Tenchi?" Ayeka's voice crackled through the receiver. "Behave? Why? What do you mean?"

Ryoko chuckled, setting her own comm device to on and stepping back as she cast a glance around her. They were in a narrow, dimly lit tunnel, she realised, a walkway within the main body of the ship and from further down the corridor the eerie glint of steel and glass indicated doors that led to various points on the vessel.

"Looks like there's probably a prize behind each door." She mused aloud. "Okay, Ayeka. This is your gig. You have the ship blueprints, don't you? Where do you want us to start?"

"The drive room." Ayeka said decidedly. "It's the third door on the right, along a narrow walkway like the one in which you're standing. The captain's body was recovered here, so it is likely to be a bit… well… unpleasant to enter. However…"

"We need to go into those places if we're to find anything out, because that's where the things happened." Tenchi said quietly. "It's all right, Ayeka. We're prepared for the worst."

"Thank you both for doing this." Ayeka sighed, then, "Political agendas are all over the place at the moment. I'm glad to know you two don't have any."

"We're on the side of whatever keeps old Azusa from getting angry and invading planet Earth." Ryoko said frankly. "Besides, at least this is something to do."

"Where is the other room, Ayeka? The one where the girl was found?" Tenchi asked.

"It's further down another corridor — second door on the right will lead you there." Ayeka responded.

"Then we'll split up." Tenchi said quietly. "Ryoko, you take the drive room. You're more familiar with electronic ship stuff than me and you'll be better equipped to find any recordings it made of the incident. I'll go check out the girl's room. See what I can find."

“Aw, but that’s no fun, Tenchi.” Ryoko pouted. “You’re abandoning me already? No fair!”

“Ryoko, Tenchi’s right.” Ayeka’s voice echoed in her ears and the pirate almost thought for a moment that she heard an element of relief in the princess’s voice. “I can split screen your cameras here and keep an eye on both of you as you progress. It will be quicker that way, and the sooner we have some data to relay, the better. I need something to tell these people, and so does Uncle.”

“Fine.” Ryoko sighed, rolling her eyes. “Then I guess I’m heading to the drive room.”

Before Tenchi could respond, she had set off along the corridor, counting the doors methodically until she came to the right one. After struggling for a moment with the door lock, she slid it open, stepping through the archway into the corridor beyond.

“Gee, charming decor.” She muttered, glancing at the slate-grey walls as she made her way slowly along the hallway towards the door Ayeka had detailed. “This ship really has a ‘come here to die’ motif about it, that’s for sure.”

“Ryoko, that’s hardly appropriate.” Ayeka’s voice scolded in her ear and Ryoko frowned, holding up her hands in mock surrender.

“Hey, forgive me for thinking aloud.” She said unrepentantly. “I get it — I know people died and I’m sorry. But seriously, this place has creepy written all over it. No wonder something horrible happened to them. It’s asking for trouble, having a corridor with barely any lighting.”

“The panels to each side of you are light-beams. They should be controlled by the ship’s engine.” Ayeka told her wearily. “But the engine died as a result of this incident, and so the lights did too. Whatever we’ve done, we’ve been unable to reactivate them. The force that scrambled the circuits must have been strong. But surely you’re not afraid of the dark, Ryoko? Fancy, a big, strong pirate like you?”

“I’m not afraid.” Ryoko snapped. “So shut your mouth. I was just making an observation.”

She hesitated, eying the doors up ahead.

“There are two doors — which way do I go? Left or right?”

“Let me check.” Ayeka responded, then, “Right. The other leads down to the engine rooms and the cargo bay.”

“Didn’t people get sorta vaccuum packed into space down there?” Ryoko asked. There was the sound of a sigh, then,

“Ryoko, please try and be a little more sensitive about this.” The princess pleaded. “It’s a very distressing incident for all of us — please try not to treat it so casually.”

“I know, I know, Im sorry.” Ryoko muttered. “Okay, so right. Fine. I’m going in… has Tenchi found the little girl’s room yet?”

“Yes, he’s just about there now.” Ayeka agreed. “You focus on your job and let Tenchi handle his, okay?”

“You know, Ayeka, did anyone ever tell you being in a position of power makes you bossy?” Ryoko reached out a finger to touch the door, then phased her form through it, finding herself in a compact but well-laid out drive room. She let out an exclamation as she registered the blood stains on the floor around the control panel, hovering some inches above the ground as she approached the ship’s main console.

“This is truly gross.” She said aloud. “You weren’t kidding when you said it might be unpleasant. Are you sure you can handle this on your film up there, Ayeka? It’s not the kind of thing refined princesses are used to seeing, I’m sure.”

“Perhaps not, but future Empresses have to do what they have to do.” Ayeka responded stiffly. “And so do former space pirates.”

“I don’t remember this being in the job description, but I’ll bite.” Ryoko shrugged, scanning the dashboard for the familiar logo of the ship’s memory device. “And this looks intact, Ayeka, even if it’s a bit bloodstained. I should be able to access it and get into the ship’s log — just give me a moment to kickstart it.”

“Can you do that without the engine power? I told you, it’s dead.” Ayeka said doubtfully, but Ryoko nodded, energy flickering from her finger-tips.

“I’m a career looter. I’ve stolen ships which have been in worse shape than this after the heated battle to claim it.” She said flippantly. “All it takes is a bit of creative hotwiring, that’s all. And this is intact, it just lacks juice. Well, I’ll give it some juice. Can’t hurt, and it might just help.”

“Ryoko, don’t you dare blow it up!” Ayeka sounded alarmed, and Ryoko laughed.

“What do you think I am? Some crass vandal?” She demanded.

“Yes, actually, there are times that I do.” Ayeka said apprehensively. “Are you sure you won’t wreck it?”

“I’m not going to damage it.” Ryoko objected. “Just a little energy, that’s all. I’m only going to use enough to boot the memory drive, not the whole engine so you can relax. I doubt I could re-juice a whole ship of this size anyhow, not without seriously exhausting myself and this really isn’t my type of spaceship. But my magic is enough like electricity to power it up, even if it’s just for a short time.”

She glanced at her hand, then down at the blood-spattered control panel, uttering a sigh.

“The things I do for Tenchi’s relatives.” She muttered, pulling up the panel that protected the switch and running her finger alongside the thick cables, sparking energy into the ship’s memory. The lights in the drive room flickered briefly for a moment, then went out, and then the monitor creaked into life, a bevy of whirling white dots gradually clearing to reveal the name of the ship and the logo of the Kanemitsu envoy.

“There, you see?” She said triumphantly. “Just a little bit. Like I said.”

“Can you get any further in than that?” Ayeka pressed. “It’s very pretty, Ryoko, but not very useful.”

“Give me a minute.” Ryoko frowned, pressing a sequence of buttons on the console and standing back to eye the results. “I’ve never been much good with the technical hacking stuff — you should have sent Washu aboard, if that’s what you wanted.”

“Washu would probably turn it into a missile launcher.” Ayeka said with a sigh. “At least you won’t do that.”

“True for you.” Ryoko grinned. “Well, it doesn’t look like there’s a lock on this thing anyway. Which is odd. I’ve never been on any ship that didn’t lock it’s log at least with a basic password. It’s just letting me push buttons and I’m opening it right up.”

“Maybe your magic hurt it more than you thought.”

“Will you drop that? It did no such thing.” Ryoko pouted. “But then I guess I wouldn’t bother password protecting something that didn’t have any information in it.”

“*What*?” Ayeka sounded incredulous, and Ryoko shrugged her shoulders.

“The log is blank. Something has wiped it — and no, it wasn’t me.

My magic couldn't have done that." She said quietly. "But as far as this ship is concerned, it never flew at all. It certainly didn't leave Kanemitsu, stop at Headquarters or wind up here, with the Jurai military. It's telling me it's still in it's home dock. The flight to Jurai never even took place."

"But that's impossible. It is here!" Ayeka protested. Ryoko spread her hands.

"I'm just telling you what it's telling me. No need to get bent out of shape." She said simply, hovering back from the console and glancing around the room as she did so. "This place is messy and obviously someone died here, but that's pretty much all it's going to tell you. Unless you do get Washu or someone more technologically anal to dig through the files, you'll have to accept that the ship's memory is blank. And if you want my opinion, something that could do that without blowing up the ship is something you probably don't want to meet on a dark night."

"Meaning?"

"Well, I met a lot of pirates in my time." Ryoko pursed her lips. "Some of whom were really good with gadgets. But I never met one who could infiltrate a place, erase the ship's log so as it thought it never travelled and then evacuate the premises without a trace. There's no sign of anything here, Ayeka. Whoever it was who did this to the crew of this ship… well, it might as well have been a ghost."

"Well, little sister, it's good to see you smiling today."

Washu slipped her hand into Tokimi's, dropping down beside the girl's bed as she offered the former priestess an amiable grin. "You seem better every day that I see you, you know… I'm glad."

"Washu-oneesama." Tokimi squeezed the hand tightly, then, "I was lonely. Have you come to play with Tokimi?"

"If you like." Washu agreed. "But what's with all the formality, Tokimi-chan? You never used to call me onee-sama when we were children. What's changed, now? Do I seem that much older to you than I did then?"

Tokimi eyed her cautiously, then nodded her head.

"Onee-sama is older than Tokimi." She said slowly. "Washu has changed."

"You think so, huh?" Washu looked rueful. "Maybe you're right. It

has been many years since we last spent so much time together. I suspect I've changed a lot."

She squeezed the hand in return, then,

"But I'm still oneechan. Okay? It's not been so long that you need to be so formal with me. Really, Tokimi… I'd prefer it that way."

"All right." Tokimi shrugged her shoulders. She glanced down at the floral print nightgown which she was dressed in, smoothing the fabric absently across her lap as she pushed back the bedcovers.

"I wanted to go play in the flowers, Washu-oneechan." She said quietly. "But the demon stopped me from going. Can we go now? Tsunami and Suki and Nii-chan were going to come with me."

"It's getting dark out now, so maybe tomorrow." Washu said gently. "And Tokimi, didn't Sasami tell you not to call her that?"

"Oh… yes." Tokimi giggled. "Her friends call her Sasami. Not Tsunami. But she is Tsunami. She is an angel, isn't she?"

Washu bit her lip.

"Why do you think that?" She asked softly. Tokimi shrugged.

"I just do." She said thoughtfully. "Because Tsunami was with Tokimi and I *saw* her. And now I see her always when Sasami is here. She's Tsunami and Tsunami is a Goddess. The settlers had a Goddess and she was called Tsunami… she had a golden tree and rays of silver light. Tokimi felt that light, Washu. She was like an angel — Tsunami gave Tokimi hope."

"Hrm." Washu pursed her lips, then, "Well, I'd rather you didn't talk to anyone about that too much. You might confuse people — it's a special secret and only Sasami's most important friends know it."

"Is Tokimi important?" Tokimi looked doubtful, and Washu laughed at the expression of genuine innocence on the girl's face.

"Yes, you're very important." She said affectionately, hugging her tightly. "And I'm very glad you're here, believe me."

"Washu always said the Settlers were good." Tokimi said slowly. "Tsunami is good, so Settlers were good… does that make Father bad?"

"No, Father wasn't bad." Washu shook her head. "Not at all. They just had different views, that's all. That's why they argued. Like you and I did, the last time we spoke on Kihaku. It doesn't mean either one was evil. Father did what he thought was best and so did the

Settlers. That's all."

"I see." Tokimi sighed heavily, then, "I wondered if the demon came here because people think the Settlers are bad."

"You need to tell me more about this demon, Tokimi." Washu said gravely. "I'm afraid I really don't know what you mean."

"I saw a demon." Tokimi's voice shook slightly. "I saw her and I thought she came to get me."

"And what happened?"

"Tsunami helped me. She took me back here… I'm safe with Tsunami." Tokimi responded. "The demon didn't come after us then."

"Sasami." Washu corrected automatically, and Tokimi nodded her head absently, twisting her hands together as she glanced down at her nails.

"Do you think you could tell me what this demon looked like?" Washu asked after a moment of silence had elapsed between them. Tokimi sighed heavily, fluttering her hands in the curious gesture of protection.

"It might curse me." She said anxiously. "I don't want to be cursed."

"I promise that noone will let you be cursed." Washu said gently. "I promise, Tokimi. Seiryo and Sasami and Suki and I will look after you and you'll be fine. No demons will be able to hurt you."

Tokimi frowned.

"The demon is here, when Tokimi sleeps she could come." She whispered. "I don't like it. Don't want the demon to come, so I don't like to sleep. Please, Washu, when you leave, take Tokimi also? Then the demon won't come and take Tokimi when she sleeps."

"I just told you that noone is going to let you get hurt, Tokimi-chan." Washu reassured her. "We just wouldn't."

Tokimi chewed down hard on her lip.

"Tokimi had a demon inside her before." She whispered. "Tsunami took it away, but it might come back. Tokimi doesn't want the demon to come get her again. Please, Oneechan… please take me with you, when you go. I want to stay with you. I want to be away from here."

Shock flickered in Washu's eyes as she realised what Tokimi meant, and she sighed heavily.

“Oh, I see.” She said sadly. “That’s what you’re afraid of. I’m sorry, Tokimi. I didn’t realise that you remembered as much as that. But you’ve been ill and this is the best place for you to be while you recover.”

“I’m all right now.” Tokimi said firmly. “I can stand up. And walk. And go play with flowers.”

“That’s true.” Washu admitted unwillingly.

“So I can come with Washu?” Tokimi clasped her hands together hopefully, and Washu sighed again.

“All right. All right, I’ll take you back with me to the palace.” She agreed reluctantly. “So long as you promise not to leave my room unless I’m with you — you don’t know your way around.”

Tokimi beamed, and Washu offered her a rueful smile.

“I’m glad you’re so happy about it.” She said wryly. “You might find you like this place better.”

She cocked her head, eying her companion thoughtfully.

“Will you tell me about the demon you saw, now?” She asked softly.

Tokimi hesitated for a moment, then nodded her head cautiously.

“She was glowing and bright and her eyes were evil.” She said seriously. “Her head was yellow and her heart was empty. She was cold and angry and I didn’t like it. It was scary, Washu. I didn’t like it at all.”

Tears sparked in the girl’s eyes and Washu frowned, hugging her sister tightly.

“All right, enough talk about this.” She said comfortingly. “We’ll find you something to wear and I’ll tell the doctors you’re coming back to the palace with me. All right? Forget about the demon now, because it’s gone and it isn’t going to come back. I promise, Tokimi — we’ll make sure that noone is ever going to hurt you again.”

“I won’t accept this as the final verdict.”

Ayeka sat back in her seat, taking a sip of her drink as she glanced between her companions, frustration on her face. “There’s nothing aboard? No clues at all? Nothing that might indicate what happened to the people on board the Sumire?”

“Nothing, Ayeka. Just blood, that’s all, and that doesn’t tell us anything we don’t know.” Tenchi looked apologetic. “I’m sorry — we’ve let you down, haven’t we?”

“No, but it doesn’t pacify the people of Kanemitsu any, if that’s the best we can do.” Ayeka set down her mug, rubbing her temples. “Can you imagine it? I’m sorry, sirs, but it seems your good representatives were killed by a ghost? It’s impossible.”

“Not necessarily.” Tenchi exchanged glances with Ryoko, and despite herself the Princess felt a pang as she interpreted the look between them. “You could say that Ryoko and I have come into contact with ghosts in recent weeks… but even so, I find it difficult to believe that’s what happened on the ship.”

“Ghosts don’t go in for random slaughter.” Ryoko relaxed back on her seat, resting her hands behind her head as she contemplated. “Truth is, they’re not really capable of anything much involving the living. Not in an actual sense, anyway. For this to have been ghost related, surely they’d have been attacking other ghosts, or whatever it was happened to me before? Not living, breathing people who are right there. How would they hold the weapon? It doesn’t make sense, and yet it’s the only thing that does make sense.”

“Ryoko, speaking of things that don’t make sense…” Ayeka raised an eyebrow pointedly, and Tenchi smiled ruefully.

“Ryoko had an encounter with a former acquaintance, and he just happened to have left this mortal plane.” He said quietly. “But I agree with her. Ghosts might be the only explanation but it doesn’t seem like the right one. I’m sure that we must have missed something — but we checked and checked and I can’t think of anything that we did.”

“I even activated the cargo bay doors, and re-enacted the whole being sucked out of the ship thing.” Ryoko glanced absently at her scuffed nails. “Which is going above and beyond the call of duty, if you ask me. It’s clear to see that anyone who can’t breathe in space would be killed pretty much straight away — but it didn’t explain how the mechanism was released if there was noone alive in the drive room at the time. Sure, it happened, we established that. But how? Beats me. It’s a real mystery.”

“Then we’re going to have to hope that Kumashiro-san’s daughter remembers something about what happened to her father.” Ayeka said slowly. “Poor girl. I’m reluctant to delve too deeply into her suppressed memories, because I’m sure they must be unpleasant.

Sasami has visited her and she's very upset, poor child, about the whole business. To interrogate her seems insensitive, but we have no other leads. She's the only survivor from the ship's mission. She's the only one who knows anything about it."

"Wait a minute." Ryoko's eyes narrowed. "You're telling me something boarded that ship, ripped the vocal chords out of three men, zapped the rest into deep space and yet left a kid unscathed? Are you serious?"

"That's what happened." Ayeka agreed, shrugging her shoulders helplessly. "Sakuya Kumashiro was found huddled up in a corner of her cabin, in a deep state of shock. Her father and his aide were nearby — both dead."

"And what's this girl made of, titanium?" Ryoko demanded. "How is that even possible?"

"How is any of it even possible?" Ayeka sighed. "None of it makes any sense. This is just another thing that doesn't."

"Maybe whoever killed the crew didn't believe in killing children." Tenchi suggested. "Ryoko, you said that the Balta pirates that Hotsuma flew with once had that motif — they wouldn't bring kids into an adult fight. Is it too far fetched to lay this at the door of an organisation such as that?"

"Balta pirates do not randomly slaughter people they have no fight with." Ryoko said acidly. "Daluma pirates, yeah. Probably they wouldn't think twice about putting a blade or a bullet through one of them. But random diplomatic trips to Jurai? Not their thing. I doubt we're dealing with a pirate guild."

"I agree with Ryoko." Ayeka said reluctantly. "Because if it were pirates, we'd have some tangible evidence. Pirate raids are too crude to be completely concealed from view."

She paused, then cast Ryoko a sidelong glance.

"No offence meant."

"None taken." Ryoko shook her head. "You're right. Most pirates don't commit crimes with the intention of them being left undetected. Symbolism is big to the guilds. Heck, even to a lone raider like I was. We leave our mark, so everyone knows who to blame and that we're not someone who's easily messed with. That's part of the pirate way. There'd be no point in them attacking a ship like this and not telling the world they did it. And besides, I thought nothing was stolen?"

“Nothing was.” Ayeka confirmed. “Ship’s inventory checked out completely. That was our first line of enquiry, but the motive does not seem to have been theft.”

“Political mercenaries, perhaps?”

A fresh voice came from the doorway and Ayeka glanced up, a tired smile touching her features as she gestured for her husband to join them.

“Takeru! I was wondering when you’d get back.” She said softly. “Has my Uncle discovered anything new from his discourse with the Kanemitsu representatives?”

“Nothing except that they’re angry, although I think he’s talked them into holding their panic until he’s had a chance to investigate fully.” Takeru shook his head. “And I have also discovered nothing from the military coroners, either. They have confirmed the causes of death but haven’t been able to identify a specific weapon. Each of the three men who were stabbed seem to have been attacked with a different blade. In fact, the coroner suggested that they had been killed with their *own* blades… though the blades were clean when they were examined.”

“Mercenaries would bring their own blades.” Ryoko said dismissively. “And there’s nothing on that ship, Takeru. Take it from me, nobody got aboard that thing. I’m a professional looter and even I couldn’t have got aboard without leaving any trace. We’re not dealing with anything logical.”

“Ryoko, stop acting like you know everything.” Ayeka snapped. “Telling us what’s not possible isn’t helping us to figure out what is.”

“Well, we’ve ruled out pirates at the very least.” Tenchi reminded her hurriedly, before his hot tempered fiancee could react. “And it doesn’t look likely that it was mercenaries. What does that leave us with?”

“With you two being dragged into something that is not your concern.” Takeru looked guilty as he took his seat opposite his wife. “I am sorry that your holiday has been so disrupted. It is much appreciated, you helping us out like this.”

“It’s not a bother.” Tenchi assured him. “In some respects I suppose it *is* our business, also — since the Earth became aware of Jurai and the Universe in general, we’ve been more connected to Jurai than not.”

“True, but being a diplomatic liason is one thing and paddling

through blood is another." Ayeka sighed heavily. "Takeru is right — we are grateful to you both."

"It's no problem. We were helping friends, after all." Tenchi shrugged his shoulders. "We didn't mind. Did we, Ryoko?"

"Well, it was a unique afternoon out, I'll give you that." Ryoko pursed her lips. "Ayeka, about this little girl. How old did you say she was?"

"Who… Kumashiro-san's daughter?" Ayeka looked surprised. "About Sasami's age, I think. Why?"

"I still think it's strange that that ship was a bloodbath and yet she survived the whole thing." Ryoko's eyes narrowed. "That doesn't add up. Are we sure she's not a closet psychopath?"

"Ryoko, that really makes no sense." Ayeka shook her head. "Can you imagine a small, slight child wielding a weapon and overpowering stocky, well-muscled men with significant military experience? Kanemitsu is a volatile planet and both Kumashiro-san and his aide Toyonaga had extensive fighting pedigrees. It's not logical."

"And besides, it's not an isolated incident." Takeru added. "Ayeka-san, have you told Ryoko-san and Tenchi-dono about the Galaxy Police agents and what happened there?"

"I think Ayeka mentioned to me that the Galaxy Police had concealed something from her." Tenchi frowned. Takeru nodded.

"Two agents were killed there, days before the Sumire arrived at Headquarters." He agreed. "The Commander was convinced to send their reports over to us and the manner of death is identical. There has to be a correlation. Which — even if you did think a girl of Sakuya's size could overpower her father — does give her something of an alibi. Sakuya Kumashiro was on Kanemitsu and then the Sumire with her father when it docked at Headquarters. She couldn't have been involved in any of it."

"Always assuming we're dealing with normal boundaries." Ryoko muttered.

"What do you mean?" Ayeka looked startled. Ryoko shrugged her shoulders.

"Nothing, possibly." She admitted. "Just that there was a really bad vibe aboard that ship. I know you thought I was creeped out but it wasn't that so much as something else. I can't explain it. And the fact that the ship's memory was erased so carefully and specifically… it

just makes me think that this isn't your average murder for hire."

"Of course, it could have been some kind of murder-suicide." Takeru suggested at length. "That the man or woman responsible was one of those jettisoned into space — even one of the Galaxy Police officers, perhaps. That seems plausible."

"Which is how they were able to erase the complete ship's flight plan after they were dead and floating in space, I suppose." Ryoko said acidly. "Takeru, I told you, it *doesn't* make sense! I might not know everything under the sun about spaceships but I know about raiding and looting and I'm telling you that this whole scenario *doesn't make sense*! Whatever creature did this, it's not someone you're going to find just by walking down the street and peering in at windows. That ship is thick with something horrible… and I don't mean the blood of those people, either. It has a dark feeling to it."

"It would help if you could explain that more clearly." Ayeka looked weary, and Ryoko shrugged.

"I'm sorry, but I can't." She responded. "I just know that's how it is. That's all."

"Well, have you ever felt anything like it before?" Tenchi asked her gently. "You're not usually given to feeling moods like this, Ryoko — it must be something significant if it affected you this time."

"I guess I'm Kii enough to have a trace of Washu's weirdness." Ryoko said quietly. "I know when there's evil around, that's all. And no, I don't often have those kinds of sensations, because I'm not given to airy fairy musing about mood. But there have been times. Souja's tree, for one. Kain, for another."

She frowned, pursing her lips.

"Seiryo Tennan." She added slowly. "When he launched his attack on the Earth, he was reeking of it."

"Well, we don't have Kain or Souja's tree." Takeru said thoughtfully. "But we do have Seiryo Tennan and we do have Tokimi. I suppose that's a line of enquiry we should have thought of before… Tokimi astrally projected many times before Sasami-chan and Washu-sama brought her to book. Perhaps she hasn't been comatose all this time after all. Perhaps she's just been murdering her way across the galaxy."

"Washu says Tokimi no longer has any magic, and nor does Lord Tennan." Tenchi objected. Ryoko frowned.

“Washu is subjective.” She said frankly. “Tokimi’s her sister and she’s soft on her… she wouldn’t want to see it even if it was there.”

“And Lord Tennan?”

“I don’t trust *Lord* Tennan.” Ryoko’s eyes darkened. “Not after what he did to Kiyone.”

“Well, I can think of more pleasant members of the Council to deal with.” Ayeka said heavily. “But without any evidence, that line of enquiry is just as dead as the others. Seiryo-sama has been here on Jurai continuously since the Hearing six months or more ago. The Unko is in Takeru’s custody and his transport papers are being held by my father. He is too much under public scrutiny to be able to sneak away from the planet without being noticed. Much as I’d like to lay this on his head, I’m not sure that we can.”

“I still think you need to talk to that girl. And really talk to her, not play up to her and go along with her fake amnesia story.” Ryoko said firmly. “Then you’ll know what happened on that ship.”

“Ryoko-san, there is no way that…” Takeru began, but Ryoko shook her head.

“I didn’t say that she did, only that she must know something and she’s hiding it.” She said simply. “Find out what that is, and maybe you’ve got your answer.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Five

The forest was dark all around her.

In the pitch blackness, Ayeka stumbled forward through the teasing, taunting branches of the trees, crying out in pain as they scratched and tore at her delicate skin. Somewhere above, a bird hooted and called, sounding like a lost spirit as it wheeled around the glow of the moon, and a chill wind whipped through her thin clothing as she forged forward.

She must keep going, this she knew. She must… it was the only way.

"Ayeka!"

The voice split the night, sending agonies of panic and fear rushing through Ayeka's thin form as she fought to push back the persistant wooden fingers that clawed at her clothing. "Ayeka, please, save me! Save me!"

Ayeka redoubled her efforts, desperate fingers fumbling at her belt for the hilt of the wooden sword she knew would be hidden there. Pulling it up before her, she gripped it tightly, watching the blade flare and glow into a sinister white light as it lit the forest ahead like a beacon. A gasp escaped her lips as she truly saw the trees for the first time — their black branches twisted and dead as they dropped their leaves to the ground below. Above her head, the bird continued in its mocking call, but there was no wildlife on the ground around her and as she stepped forward along the rocky path, she was increasingly aware of how alone she really was.

"Ayeka!" The voice was closer now, and yet more frightened than it had been before. "Ayeka, are you there? Don't leave me! Don't leave me, Ayeka!"

"Sasami!"

Now Ayeka knew it was her sister's voice and she set her teeth, slashing and cutting at the tree branches with her blade as she hurried towards the source of the noise. At length she reached the end of the path, stopping dead as she registered the immense looming shape of Tsunami's tree, thick boughs rich with foliage spreading over her head as they split the shards of moonlight into a mottled pattern on the ground. Clutched deep within the tree's branches, Ayeka could make out the fragile form of her younger sister, who turned at the sound of her approach, holding out a beseeching

hand.

"Ayeka, please, help me!" She exclaimed. "Cut me free! Quickly! Save me!"

Anger and determination flooded Ayeka's body and she raised the blade over her head, bringing it down with some force against the wizened trunk of Tsunami's tree. As her blade met the wood, however, there was a bright flash of light and she found herself sent flying backwards, hitting the ground with a thud as pain rushed through her senses.

"Ayekaaaa…"

Sasami's voice grew fainter and fainter, and Ayeka struggled to reach her sister's hand, but it was to no avail. As blackness overwhelmed them both, the princess was sure she heard the sound of sinister, mocking laughter, and then the world around her was still.

"Sasami?!"

Ayeka's eyes snapped open, fear and alarm in her ruby eyes as she struggled to see any sign of her small sister around her. Shock flickered across her expression as she realised where she was, and as a cold wind flitted around her, she shivered, glancing down at herself with a mixture of shock and confusion.

"It… was a dream?" She murmured, not comprehending what she saw. "But… it seemed so real. And… and why am I here? Outside? What…?"

Her fingers brushed against something hard and narrow and she scooped it up, glancing at it in the dim light of the moon. Horror flooded her features as she recognised what it was.

"A sword of Jurai." She whispered, gazing up and registering the overhanging presence of Tsunami's sacred tree as she did so. "But… it was a dream. Wasn't it? Sasami? Sasami, are you here?"

There was no reply, and Ayeka got unsteadily to her feet, sliding the sword into the sash of her nightdress as she approached the immense trunk cautiously, running her finger across the surface. A faint tingling beneath her touch told her that the tree was alive and aware of her presence, and as she moved her hand further, a flash of consternation filled her heart. She shook her head, running her fingers once more over the deep gash in the wood.

"No… I didn't." She said softly. "*Did* I? But I was dreaming… Tsunami's tree… I was *dreaming*!"

She relinquished her touch on the wood, watching as the trunk

swelled and re-formed itself into it's original pattern, healing over the gash until it was no longer visible to the naked eye. She sighed, gazing up into Tsunami's branches to the place where she had been sure her young sister had been trapped.

"Sasami isn't here." She realised. "And why would I dream something like that, anyway? Tsunami means her no harm. She protects, she doesn't hurt."

She bit her lip, eying the tree guiltily.

"I'm sorry, Tsunami. I didn't mean to hurt you." She murmured, bowing her head and the great tree let out feeble flickers of light in response. "I was having a bad dream, and I guess I was… well… I must have been sleepwalking. I've never done that before, but everything has been so busy and stressful for me recently. Perhaps that is what happened. But I am very sorry. I suppose that when I struck your trunk, you woke me up. Believe me, I would never wish harm on you."

Tsunami's tree glittered once more, then was still, and Ayeka sighed, dropping back against the thick trunk as she slid down to the ground. She gazed up through the heavy branches to the sky above, taking in the clear night and the glittering stars that sparkled around the moon.

"Nothing to be afraid of." She acknowledged. "The Royal Forest, the sanctuary of our trees… I guess I really have been working too hard. Or is there more to it? Am I really that jealous of Sasami's friendships and alliances that I dream about something like this? Or is it Tenchi's engagement that has me so upset? I'm trying not to be — it's stupid that he should still affect me so badly. But he does… he really does. And I'm confused. I'm so very confused, Tsunami."

She buried her head in her hands, shaking her head.

"I wish you could talk to me the way you talk to my sister." She added helplessly. "If ever I needed divine counsel, I think now would be it."

The tree did not respond, and Ayeka grimaced, pulling herself to her feet as a fresh wind whipped through her thick silken hair.

"I should go back to bed, before someone realises I'm missing and sounds an alarm." She decided, pragmatism overtaking distress in her mind. "I'm a future Empress of Jurai and that is how I must act, especially at the moment. Uncle relies on me to be steady and I must be."

She cast a lingering glance back at the tree, then shook her head.

“Please forgive me for hurting you.” She repeated. “I know you are my true sister and I would never do anything to hurt Sasami. You must believe that… I love her more than anything, I would never… I could never… I didn’t mean it. Please, Tsunami, try to understand.”

Tsunami’s tree remained silent, but somehow Ayeka knew the Goddess had heard and understood. Turning on her heel, she made her way resolutely back towards the palace, trying to ignore the chill that seeped through her skin to the bone as she did so. In just her night clothes she felt both cold and vulnerable in the night air, and fervently she hoped that she would not meet anyone one her trip back to her chamber.

So lost in thought was she that she didn’t see the fleeting gaze of a face in an upstairs window of the palace complex, a mixture of expressions flittering across opaque eyes as the princess made her return home.

As Ayeka passed along the hallway towards the wing which housed both her rooms and those belonging to her sister, she paused at Sasami’s door, sliding her hand into the catch and pushing it carefully open.

The moonlight shone in through the window, illuminating the young princess as she slept, and at the sight of her sister slumbering so peacefully, a tiny smile touched Ayeka’s face.

“Well, so it was a dream indeed.” She told herself, comforted by this obvious proof of Sasami’s safety. “Ayeka, you really are working far too hard. You need to try and relax, like Tenchi says — you’re far too wound up and it’s taking it’s toll.”

Sasami murmured something in her sleep, and Ayeka’s eyes softened.

“Yes, sleep, my sister.” She said softly. “I’ll speak to you tomorrow.”

She withdrew from the chamber, pulling the door shut behind her with a faint click as she continued on her way towards her own chamber, unlocking the door and stepping inside and setting the sword down on the top of the wooden desk that stood in the corner. For a moment she glanced at her bed, but somehow sleep was the last thing that she wanted to do, and with a frown she pulled her robe from its peg, wrapping it tightly around her slim form as she slid her slippers onto her feet.

“If I’m going to move around, I might at least be decently attired.”

She murmured. “Perhaps I could take a bath. Or… I don’t know. Walk down and see if any further information has come in overnight. If we can resolve this matter, then maybe everything will calm down. And I can’t sleep right now, not after a dream like that. I’m jumpy and unsettled, and who knows where I might end up if I sleepwalk again?”

As she left her room once more, she paused, realising that the entire corridor had been devoid of guardsmen and she frowned, remembering that since the incident with Kagato, there had always been someone on duty through the day and night. Confused, she padded down the hallway to the small room where the men took their breaks during changeover, letting out an exclamation as she realised that the three who constituted night staff were all within the chamber, each one of them as fast asleep as Sasami had been moments earlier. Anger replacing uncertainty, she banged on the lights, startling two of the three awake and as they registered their presence, they kicked their third, scrambling to their feet and offering her a frantic salute.

“Yes, and that’s all very well, but you should be on duty.” Ayeka said sharply. “You know my Uncle would not be pleased to know you were shirking your duties.”

“But Lady Ayeka, I swear, I *was* on duty.” One of the men looked befuddled, scratching his head. “And then… then I was here. I don’t remember…”

“No excuses.” Ayeka shook her head. “Lady Sasami’s room is unguarded, as is my own. It’s not good enough… you are paid a good wage not to fall asleep.”

“We will attend to it right now, Lady Ayeka.” The second man said hurriedly, almost falling over himself to get out into the hallway. “Would you like us to escort you to your chamber now?”

“No… I have business downstairs.” Ayeka shook her head. “But when I return, I expect to find that you are doing your duty and not taking a nap. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Ayeka-hime.” The third man bowed. “We’ll be right on it, Ayeka-hime.”

“See that you are.” Ayeka told them crisply, turning on her heel and sweeping out of the room with a justifiably indignant toss of her head. As she stalked down the corridor, she was gratified to hear the scramble of guardsmen behind her as they hurried to take up their positions, and she glanced at her hands ruefully.

“Well, at least I have the authority bit down.” She acknowledged.

“Perhaps Ryoko is right. Perhaps positions of power do make me bossy. But honestly, sleeping on the job… what next? No wonder nobody missed me. I swear, things are getting more and more ridiculous by the minute.”

She reached the end of the hallway, hesitating as she debated which way to turn. For a moment she glanced down the hallway towards the main stairs and the central administration of the palace, half curious to know if any further information had been dug up by the unfortunate security agents working around the clock to glean clues on the Kanemitsu murders. But at length she turned the other way, padding down the hallway towards the far wing of the palace, where she knew her husband’s suite of rooms lay. Though it was not uncommon for married couples within the palace to have seperate quarters, or that they should call on one another in the night, she felt more than a little self-conscious as she drew nearer, half-wondering what she would tell the guard on duty. As it happened, however, the man on sentry at the end of Takeru’s hall merely saluted her as she passed, making no attempt to question her nighttime forays, and although Ayeka was sure her cheeks were blazing red by the time she reached Takeru’s door, she arrived at her destination unmolested.

For a moment she just stood there, uncertain as to whether she should knock. It was late, she knew that, and uncertainty flooded his mind. Would he understand why she had come here at such a strange time? Would he take it as a sign of something else… and why *had* she come here, anyway? What had driven her to seek out her husband’s comfort in the early hours of the morning, when she had never been compelled to do so before?

As she raised a tentative hand to strike the wooden panel door, it slid back to reveal the Consort himself, rich mahogany robe tied neatly at the waist, and his thick hair pulled back into a band at the nape of his neck. Ayeka let out a startled gasp, her hand flying to her chest as she met his gaze, cheeks reddening under his scrutiny. He looked more handsome this way, she observed absently, without the formality of court dress, and somehow this sensation disturbed her even further. She swallowed hard, for once in her life completely lost for words..

“I’m sorry. I made you jump.” Takeru looked contrite. “What brings you here so late, my Lady? Is something the matter?”

“How… you… did you *know* I was coming?” Ayeka regathered herself, staring at him in surprise. Takeru looked sheepish.

“The wind is noisy against my shutters and I could not sleep.” He

admitted. “I heard footsteps in the hall and I… I *hoped* they might be yours. They were soft and gentle, not the thud of guard boots. I thought they might be your slippers… and I was right.”

“You… know what my slippers sound like?” Ayeka stared down at her feet, non-plussed, then, “Can I come in? I… I don’t want to be inappropriate, Takeru, but…”

“You don’t need to ask to gain admission to my rooms.” Takeru stood back, ushering her into his bedchamber and somehow the soft glow of the Juraian lamps comforted Ayeka as she stepped inside, glancing around her a little self-consciously.

“We have been married more than half a year, and I have never been here before.” She said softly. “Do you think that strange, Takeru? That I have never visited you in your chambers before now?”

“No, not considering the nature of our alliance.” Takeru sat down on the bed, indicating for her to sit beside him. “But what brings you to me tonight? Something has upset you, I can tell.”

Ayeka did not answer to begin with, and Takeru touched her gently on the cheek.

“If it’s about the conversation we had — about visiting chambers and the duties of husband and wife, I don’t ask anything of you until you are ready and you shouldn’t feel compelled to comply with court expectations.” He said softly. “So if you are here on that errand, I will simply send you back to your chamber.”

“No… I mean… no.” Ayeka pinkened, shaking her head. “I… I guess I just… I didn’t want to be alone, that’s all. It was… I had a strange dream. And I didn’t… well, I didn’t know what to do.”

“A dream?” Takeru looked startled. “What kind of a dream?”

“It’s hard to explain, but I was out at Tsunami’s tree and Sasami was a prisoner in her branches.” Ayeka buried her head in her hands. “And all the other royal trees were dead — like skeletons, only they seemed somehow to still move and, well, feel. It’s hard to explain clearly, but they were trying to stop me getting to her. She kept calling to me for help, though… and so I kept going.”

“I see.” Takeru frowned. “Perhaps you are taking this matter of your sister’s blossoming friendships a little too much to heart, Ayeka-chan.”

“Yes, perhaps I am.” Ayeka admitted. “But Takeru, it wasn’t just the dream. I’ve had nightmares before, but… but not like this. I… I was

really there. I mean out there, in the royal forest. When I woke up, I was right there at Tsunami's tree. But I don't remember getting there. I just remember dreaming."

"You sleepwalked?" Takeru looked concerned, as his wife nodded her head. "Have you ever done that before?"

"Not that I know of." Ayeka groaned. "But it was so awful, waking up there in the cold and dark with this sword beside me on the ground. And I hit out at the tree, Takeru. That bit wasn't a dream. I thought I was rescuing Sasami, but I struck at Tsunami's tree. She healed when I was there, and I think she forgave me. But striking her is like striking Sasami… so I feel guilty. I would *never* hurt my sister."

"It was a dream." Takeru said gently. "Noone doubts your love for Sasami, Ayeka. Least of all Tsunami. She must understand it better than most, in fact. Whatever you did in your sleep, you sought only to *protect* your little sister. Tsunami would not hold that against you."

"Perhaps not. But I feel bad anyway. And confused." Ayeka sighed, leaning up against him. "Thank you for listening to me. I know it's late."

"I am never put out by you coming to confide in me, Ayeka." Takeru said affectionately, sending her a tender smile. "It means a lot that you came here, above all other places, when something was on your mind. That I've inspired such confidence in you makes me very happy indeed — I can do without sleep for once."

Despite herself, Ayeka smiled self-consciously.

"Talking to you makes me feel like it wasn't such a big deal thing." She admitted. "And that it was just the sudden nature of it that scared me, that's all. I'm working hard and it's probably stress. That's all. Right?"

"Yes, I think so." Takeru agreed. "You have been under much pressure lately, it's true."

"Then it's probably nothing at all." Ayeka pursed her lips, then eyed him hesitantly. "Takeru?"

"Yes?"

"Can I… can I stay here tonight?" Ayeka asked hesitantly, her cheeks pinkening as she dropped her gaze to the bedcovers. "Not… you know, in that way. I'm not ready… it's too soon. But… I don't want to be alone. Not after… not after that."

"Of course you may." Takeru's eyes softened. "I would be neglectful

of you indeed if I refused a plea like that."

"Thank you." Gratitude glittered in Ayeka's expression. "And Takeru? I'd prefer it if you didn't mention this to anyone. Uncle has enough to worry about and well, I don't want anyone thinking I can't handle what's being thrown at me."

"Then it's our secret." Takeru touched her gently on the cheek. "But for now, my Princess, you look tired and you need to sleep. Anything else can wait till the morning… it's time to get some rest."

So another day had dawned, and he was still no closer to unravelling the secrets in the encrypted file.

Seiryo hesitated at the entrance to the Royal Conclave, gazing up at the clouds briefly as if looking for inspiration among their fluffy depths.

"Kuramitsu-san was no fool, and he knew what he was doing." He muttered. "Unfortunately, more so than I do. Perhaps I should stop trying to disentangle this myself and go to the Emperor — but then I'd have to reveal where I got it from, and that would put Miss Makibi in an awkward position. If only I didn't have so many other things on my mind at the moment. I feel sure that girl's file is the root cause of the events on the Sumire — but proving it, that's the hard part. We don't even know what we're dealing with."

"You lied to me."

As he entered the palace grounds, he was accosted by the accusatory tones of the detective herself and he paused, staring at her in confusion as he registered her irritated demeanour. Realising she had his attention, Kiyone put her hands on her hips, glaring at him indignantly.

"You lied to me." She repeated softly. "Do you think I'm so much of a fool as that? If you are going to help me, don't patronise me by concealing bits of information from me!"

"Excuse me?" Seiryo blinked. "Are you having one of your delusions? Because I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

The words were out before he could call them back and Kiyone's eyes narrowed angrily, her fists clenched tightly against her side as if she was struggling to control her temper. For a moment Seiryo thought she might hit out at him but she suppressed the impulse, wheeling on him with flinty blue eyes.

“I’m talking about the file I gave you.” She said in low tones. “Why didn’t you tell me about this other ship?”

“Other ship?” Seiyo faltered, eying her keenly. “Is this something you want to discuss in full view of the palace, Detective Makibi? I had thought you had more discretion than that.”

“Oh, damn you.” Kiyone muttered. “Fine. But I want to know why you didn’t tell me about *IT* when you had the chance to mention *IT* in the privacy of Washu’s temporary lab.”

“If by *IT* you mean what I think you mean, the Emperor asked us to treat it with discretion, and I have no desire to worsen my cause with him in any way.” Seiryo said quietly. “There may be a connection or there may not be. I can’t tell until I handle the other thing you gave me, and I haven’t managed to do so yet.”

“You know, I’ve met some arrogant men in my time.” Kiyone said coldly. “But you’re the worst of the lot.”

“I see you’re not scared of me any more, however. That has to be seen as a positive move.” Seiryo offered her a droll smile, and Kiyone bristled.

“Hating you and yelling at you is easier on my nerves.” She shot back. “And you really aren’t worth me losing my mind over. But I want to solve this matter and I am as involved in it as you are. I trusted you with what I knew, so it would be nice if you would do the same.”

Seiryo sighed, annoyance flickering into his teal eyes. He hesitated for a moment, then grabbed her by the arm, pulling her into the shade of a nearby copse of trees.

“Hey!” Kiyone wrested her arm free, glaring at him, but Seiryo saw brief flickers of alarm in the depths of those sapphire eyes. “What do you think you’re playing at?”

“Look, this whole business is top secret. What you gave me and what the Emperor has told the Council both.” The nobleman said darkly. “If you go shooting your mouth off — even if you do hate me — then neither thing will be solved. I’m sorry, but I didn’t think it necessary to scare you further with information Azusa-heika gave to us. I don’t know for sure there’s a connection and I’ve been trained not to jump to wild conclusions. Whatever you do in the regular division, it pays to see a hunch pan out before you make too much noise.”

“Meantime someone else might die.” Kiyone snapped back at him. “Washu thinks that whatever it is is looking for that file, Seiryo! It has

to be connected."

"Because Washu said so?" Seiryo raised an eyebrow. "Interesting deduction. And I know I told you to use my name, but isn't that an *overly* familiar way of addressing a man whom you so obviously detest?"

"Do you *deserve* more respect?" Kiyone retorted acidly. "Get over yourself… this is obviously a lot bigger than one isolated Seniwan spy ship, and I want to know what's going on. Don't you?"

"Yes, I do." Seiryo pursed his lips. "All right. It sounds like you already know something, anyway. You know that there was an incident aboard a diplomatic ship that was headed for Jurai?"

"Washu said people were murdered aboard it. Slit throats, like the Tsubasa." Kiyone said impatiently. "*She's* not afraid to trust me, and Azusa didn't swear her to secrecy."

"Probably because he's a little afraid of the woman." Seiryo observed dryly. "I wouldn't like to cross her, that's for sure. All right, so that explains how you found out. What do you need me for? Seems you have all your evidence."

"I wanted to know why you kept it from me. I wanted to know if it was all part of your superiority complex." Kiyone muttered. "That's all."

"An oath to the Emperor is an oath to the Emperor. Breaking it is treason and I'm on thin enough ground." Seiryo said frankly. "It's no comment on your ability, although accosting me about this in broad daylight seems out of character for someone with your reputation, Detective."

Kiyone flushed red at this, and Seiryo smiled.

"I will keep working on the file, but it's more deeply encoded than I thought." He added. "It's proving troublesome to crack, but I will get into it. Then we'll know where we stand."

"All right." Kiyone sighed. "And have you told me everything, now? Are we straight with one another? Because I don't like working with you as it is… if it wasn't that people at Headquarters might be hurt…"

"Two men already were, you know." Seiryo said quietly. Kiyone stared.

"What? At Headquarters? Not the Galaxy Police escorts on this Sumire ship?" She demanded. Seiryo shook his head.

“Two agents called Tsunetomo and Hirayama. Killed, just like the others.” He said frankly. “I knew both… unlike the rest of the Council members, they were more than just names to me. They were respected colleagues, both highly gifted in their fields.”

Kiyone blanched.

“You’re kidding.” She whispered. “That’s not… it’s not…”

“What?” Seiryo raised an eyebrow. “What about them?”

“They were the men who brought me to Jurai.” Kiyone murmured, her anger of a few minutes earlier entirely gone. “Dead? But… in the same way?”

“Yes.” Seiryo nodded. “They were good men — good agents. And not people you’d easily take off guard.”

He frowned, eying her curiously.

“Are you unwell? You’ve gone very white.”

“Washu *is* right. She must be.” Kiyone whispered. “But the connection — it isn’t the Galaxy Police. That Seniwan ship, Headquarters, the Sumire — they’re all just stepping stones. Stepping stones to get to *me*. My ship was wrecked… and I have the file that you’re trying to un-encrypt. But I don’t understand — surely the Galaxy Police Elite took their own copy of the Tsubasa’s files?”

“The Sumire’s drives appear to have been wiped clean.” Seiryo said thoughtfully. “Perhaps the Tsubasa’s were, too. You just interrupted the killer before they had a chance to do it, that’s all. Stands to reason — your black box’s evidence might be the only record remaining that tackles what we’re dealing with.”

“Then whatever it was *was* probably watching me when I was there.” Kiyone shivered, and for a moment Seiryo was afraid she might pass out. Then she seemed to rally herself, determination flickering in her eyes.

“Well, in that case, there’s even more reason to try and solve this before that *thing* gets here.” She said flatly.

“I think it’s already here.” Seiryo said grimly. Kiyone stared at him in alarm.

“*What*?”

“The other day, in the Infirmary, Tokimi said she saw a demon.” Seiryo said quietly. “You know Washu, so you know that Kii see things other people don’t see when they look at someone. Tokimi might be

hurt and confused, but I don't believe she was delusional. I believe what she saw is the thing you *didn't* see… that somehow it can conceal itself from people's eyes. But because Kii eyes always see the true nature…"

"It can't hide from them." Kiyone whispered. "Do you really think that's what she saw? Washu did say Tokimi was unsettled still."

"I do." Seiryo inclined his head slightly. "When I was… shall we say, infected by Kii magic, it was one of the abilities which she gave me, temporarily. I know how strong it is… and how accurate. Yes, I think Tokimi really did see a demon. That being the case, a good many people could be in danger."

"You need to crack that file." Kiyone said blackly, and Seiryo nodded.

"I'm on it." He agreed. "If I had my ship, I'd be on it a lot quicker, but I'm doing my best."

Kiyone sighed heavily.

"There should be something *I* can do." She said pensively. Seiryo shook his head.

"Right now, that thing has let you live." He said bluntly. "For whatever reason — probably *because* — if it's found you, it's waiting for you to reveal what you know. While you don't know anything, you're probably safe. But the chances are that people who died knew something or saw something — or were just in the way. You could be in danger if this thing realised that your data recorder wasn't as blank as it seemed when you left Headquarters. While it hasn't tracked that down, it won't be interested in killing you. But it's a dangerous game. You'd do better stepping back for a while."

"It's *my* case."

"No, it's not. It's an Elite case that you've appropriated." Seiryo said seriously. "You know it as well as I do."

"You're no more authorised than I am!"

"Perhaps not. But you brought me into this, and I have training you don't." Seiryo shrugged. "It's up to you, but if you get murdered, it won't be very helpful."

Despite herself, Kiyone swallowed hard, and inwardly Seiryo regretted the harshness of his words. Then she shrugged, meeting his gaze defiantly.

“Fine.” She said flatly. “But when you know something, Tennan-san, you tell me. All right? Whatever it is. Like it or not we’re in this together and I don’t back out on cases. I see them through to the bitter end!”

With which parting shot she turned on her heel, very much on her dignity as she stalked out of the shade of the trees and disappeared back towards the palace. Seiryo leant up against the trunk of the nearest tree, watching her go with a thoughtful look in his eyes.

“Somehow it’s easier to deal with blind hatred than fear. I’m more used to that.” He mused to himself. “But she’s a fool… she didn’t learn anything from crossing Tokimi’s path and she’s going to wind up being killed if she doesn’t learn that she can’t save the universe on her own. Which means I need to get to the bottom of this. Protecting Kiyone Makibi from a horrible fate might not have been on my agenda before, but I suppose it’s the best penance I could do… and besides, if she’s right, she probably is in danger. Or she will be. When this creature discovers what’s become of her file.”

As he stood there, he became aware of a commotion across the far side of the lawn and as he stepped out of the trees, he recognised the sound of Tokimi’s voice, frightened and plaintive amid the rest. Cursing under his breath, the nobleman quickened his pace, hurrying towards the source of the noise, Kiyone forgotten for the time being. As the voices became louder, Seiryo was able to make out some of the words and anger coursed through him as he registered what was going on. Amid Tokimi’s desperate pleas to be left alone, he was aware of scorn and disdain as a trio of young courtiers threw a mixture of derision and abuse in her direction.

“Demon! Why are you even here? What evil are you planning to do to our planet?”

“In the name of Tsunami, you shouldn’t be allowed to walk among us. What gives a monster like you the right to live peacefully on Jurai when so many others have died because of you?”

“My ancestors were Kii. Do you think I’m going to stand back while their murderer walks free?”

“*Enough*!” Seiryo pushed between them, hauling the closest of the young men away from his terrified victim and tossing him down on the ground. “Tokimi is a ward of Jurai and you will treat her with the respect she deserves!”

“We *were*.” The tallest of the youths glared up at Seiryo, venom in his gaze. “And you have as much honour as she does, Lord Tennan.

Everyone knows you're her slave — you do her bidding and plot to destroy Jurai from within. The Emperor may trust you, but we all know who you are and what your evil plans are. You are as big a disgrace as she is, and make no mistake about that!"

"Nii-chan, why are they angry with me?" Tokimi grasped at Seiryo's hands and the look of genuine bewilderment in the deep blue eyes sparked Seiryo's anger a second time. He drew his sword, white blade flickering and glowing into life as he placed himself neatly in front of her, narrowing his gaze as he glanced from one young protagonist to the next.

"I am a peer of Jurai, and a subject of the Emperor." He said quietly. "It is his will that I take care of Tokimi, and none of your business that I do so. Her presence here is with Azusa-heika's blessing. Do you seek to attack the will of your King? That is treason… of which you dare accuse *me!*"

"*Everyone* knows that the Tennan family are not loyal to the Council or to Lord Azusa." The tall youth spat back. "My family have been on the Council for generations too, Lord Tennan, and my father says…"

"Your father is ill advised to confide anything in you, if you honour him by betraying his trust." Seiryo cut across the man's petulant speech. "You are Jun Hirata… I recognise your sallow features just as well as I do his. Would you like it conveyed to the Emperor that you — *and* your father — consider him a fool for who he chooses to trust?"

Despite himself, the youth paled, taking a hesitant step back. Seiryo nodded slowly.

"I am not the traitor you believe me to be." He said coldly. "Nor am I going to shirk from my duty if the need arises. If your father has disloyal comments to make, I suggest you tell him to make them elsewhere, or to address his concerns to the Emperor at Council session. Otherwise he might find himself on the end of an arrest warrant — and such cases can prove messy."

"You'd know all about that, Lord Tennan." A second youth put his hands on his hips. "Or is patricide not considered a crime any more?"

"Having never committed it, I wouldn't know." Seiryo responded neatly. "Disperse, the lot of you. You are children playing playground games. Can't you see that she doesn't understand a word you're saying to her? She doesn't know what you're talking about, and you're cruel to torment her in this way. She is Kii, not demon. Learn the

difference."

"I know the difference very well, Lord Tennan, and if you seek to punish me because I do then that's up to you." The youth's eyes narrowed. "Many are the legends of the wrath of Lady Tokimi. I know them all too well. My grandfather's ancestors were Kii born, and I have no shame in this connection. But I refuse to see why I should breathe the same air as the monster who defiled my family's homeland and destroyed so many lives. She is evil and you should step aside. She deserves death, after the pain she's brought to so many."

"And that's what *you* seek to do?" Seiryo asked quietly, aware of Tokimi's pale face and shaking form out of the corner of his eye. "To kill a sick girl who doesn't remember, for crimes committed many millennia before you were born?"

"She remembers. She's as false as you are. She pretends, but I'm not fooled!"

The young man raised his own weapon, making a dive for Tokimi, but Seiryo was fast and he parried the blow, knocking the blade out of the boy's hand.

"Attack her again and I *will* speak for you myself." He said darkly, his eyes flickering with anger. "And learn to hold your blade before you disgrace yourself with it further."

"The demon gives him magic." The third youth, who had remained silent whispered now, staring up at Seiryo with wary, suspicious eyes. "She's cursed him and now noone on Jurai is safe."

"I warned you once. *Leave. Her. Alone*." Seiryo's eyes narrowed, and despite their bravado, the youths shrank back. Seiryo nodded.

"Yes, that's right. That's the first sensible thing you've done so far." He added. "Go or I *will* report this to Lord Azusa. You give our planet a bad name, all of you."

He raised his sword once more and their nerve gone, the boys fled. Seiryo grimaced, then turned his attention to Tokimi, who buried her head in his shoulder, shaking with frightened tears.

"They were angry at Tokimi." She whispered. "Why? Did I do a bad thing?"

"No… no." Despite his indignation at the incident, Seiryo softened his tones, shaking his head. "They're just idiotic children and you shouldn't bother about them. All right? It's fine now. They've gone

and they won't bother you again."

Tokimi raised troubled blue eyes to her companion and despite himself Seiryo bit his lip at the genuine anguish in their depths.

"But they were angry." She murmured. "And they made *Nii-chan* angry."

"Yes, they did." Seiryo admitted ruefully. "But I'm not angry with you. What are you doing out here anyway, Tokimi? I thought you were still safely tucked up in the Infirmary."

"Washu took me out." Tokimi shook her head. "I didn't want to stay with the demon. So she took me. I stayed in her room."

"But you wandered off without telling her?"

"I wanted to find flowers for Washu-neechan." Tokimi looked guilty. "I'm sorry."

Seiryo sighed.

"Well, right now I don't think the palace is the best place for you." He decided heavily. "I'm going to be late for the Council, but I'll just have to be late. Come on, Tokimi. I'm taking you with me, back to my house. Suki will be there and you know she'll take good care of you. Then you won't need to worry about silly court wastrels like Jun Hirata and his friends. Our grounds have almost as many flowers as the palace… my mother always loved the gardens, and she's always insisted on them being tended, even now. I promise that you can find all the blooms you want there."

"Really?" Tokimi brightened at this, and Seiryo laughed.

"Really." He agreed. "So will you come? I'll tell Washu where you are, so she won't be worried. But I think you'll be safer there."

"Then I will come with Nii-chan." Tokimi said, grabbing him tightly by the hand and sending him a warm grin. "And see your house."

As Seiryo guided his charge out towards the Tennan estate, he caught sight of someone watching him from the edge of the palace and in surprise he realised that Kiyone had not gone so very far after all.

"So now she's spying on me, in case I've kept something else from her?" He wondered. "Stupid girl. She shouldn't have let me near her file, if she didn't trust me with it."

He met the detective's gaze, frowning as he read the expression on her face. It was a mixture of confusion and surprise, and despite

himself, Seiryo wondered at it.

“Nii-chan, is your house big?”

Tokimi’s tugging on his hand jerked him back to the situation at hand and he turned, pushing Kiyone out of his thoughts once more as he offered his charge a smile.

“Big enough.” He agreed. “And it’s not far to walk. I’ll see you safe with Suki, and then I have to go back to see the Emperor. But she’ll show you the flowers, so you’ll be fine then. I don’t pretend to be an expert on blossoms, but I’m sure you can find something pretty for Washu in our grounds, and as far as I’m concerned you can pick any that you like. Is it a deal?”

Tokimi beamed, childish contentment gleaming in her blue eyes as she nodded her head.

“Yes.” She agreed. “It’s a deal.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Six

"Good morning, Sakuya-chan!"

Sasami poked her head around the door of the Infirmary side room, letting out an exclamation as she registered her new friend's appearance. Still pale as the moon, and with her fluffy dark hair pulled back in tails either side of her face, there was still a fragility about the child that hinted at the terrible ordeal she had been through. And yet, despite this, she was up and dressed, a faint flicker of pleasure crossing her aqua eyes at the Princess's entry.

"You're out of bed!" Sasami grinned companionably at the other girl. "Does that mean that you're feeling better?"

"Yes, so long as I don't have palace officials here asking me all kinds of nasty questions." Sakuya grimaced, shrugging her shoulders. "I just don't want to think about what happened — I want to be left alone. But they won't listen. That Prince Takeru has been here, and Princess Ayeka and Lord Haru and other people… all wanting to know what I remember. I wish they'd just go away."

"They only want to help find out what happened to your Father." Sasami said gently. "But I can understand how that would upset you. Still, I'm not here to ask you those kinds of things. I came to see how you were — if you're feeling so much better, surely you can come out into the grounds with me and I can show you around? You must be bored, stuck away up here. And you do look better, Sakuya-chan."

"I would love to get out of here." Sakuya said fervently, getting to her feet. "Thank you, Sasami-hime. I'd like that very much."

"You don't have to call me Princess, you know." Sasami said reflectively. "I don't mind if you don't — it sounds so formal when it comes from a friend."

"Are you sure?" Sakuya looked startled, and Sasami nodded.

"Most of my friends just call me Sasami or Sasami-chan." She agreed. "And we are friends, aren't we?"

"Yes, we are." A thoughtful expression crossed Sakuya's features, but it was gone in an instant and the girl smiled. "Then I'll call you Sasami-chan."

“Good.” Sasami dimpled, holding out her hand to her new ally, but Sakuya hesitated, shaking her head.

“I… still…” She faltered, and Sasami looked sheepish, dropping her arm to her side.

“I’m sorry. I forgot.” She said ruefully. “Never mind. Follow me, okay? I know a short cut out of the Infirmary and you won’t have to go past all the stuffy nurses. Some of them are nice and all, but some of them are really strict about patients and visitors and they wouldn’t even let you out on my authority. That’s the thing that sucks most about being a Princess, sometimes. Everyone calls you silly titles but they don’t listen to what I say or think all the time because I’m only thirteen.”

“Being a kid can be a nuisance.” Sakuya agreed, as she followed her deft companion along the hallway and down a side corridor towards a second exit. “But it can also be good, too. Noone suspects a child, after all. Surely you can have fun, with a home as big as Jurai’s royal palace?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Sasami nodded her head. “And I’m lucky, too. I have Suki to spend time with and now I have you too, while you’re here.”

“Are you not close to your sister, then?” Sakuya looked surprised. Sasami nodded.

“Ayeka and I are very close.” She agreed. “But Ayeka is always busy at the moment, with work for Uncle. She’s going to be Empress of Jurai one day, so she has to learn all these really boring, annoying things about running the planet and everything else. I’m glad that won’t be my job. I never wanted to be Queen of Jurai and I’d still hate it, if someone offered it to me now.”

“I think maybe you don’t want to grow up.” Sakuya remarked astutely, and Sasami blushed.

“Sometimes.” She admitted. “Things change when you grow up. But in other ways I do — people will listen to me more then.”

“Noone listens to you now?”

“It depends.” Sasami shrugged her shoulders, pushing open the big oaken door and skipping out into the palace grounds. “Through here, Sakuya-chan. This leads right around the back of the palace and we can go sit in the shade of the trees and talk, if you like.”

“That sounds nice.” Sakuya owned, nodding her head. “But what do

you mean, it depends? I don't understand."

"Father and Mother are protective of me, and in some ways I'm glad they are." Sasami considered. "Father is determined that I'm not getting married till I'm eighteen and I'm happy about that — there are a lot of rich and nasty men who want to marry a Princess even if she's only thirteen. But sometimes it means they don't listen right away, if I tell them something important. And that can be annoying."

She shot her friend a sidelong glance.

"Isn't it that way for you? I mean, well, you must have family on Kanemitsu who worry about you."

"My mother…" Sakuya was silent for a moment, and horror flooded Sasami's young heart as she registered the genuine sadness in the aqua eyes. She bit her lip.

"I'm sorry, did I say something I shouldn't?" She asked anxiously. "I didn't mean to talk about your family, Sakuya-chan. I didn't mean to remind you."

"Oh, it's all right. It's nothing." Sakuya shook her head, offering a faint smile. "I suppose I'm just homesick. And, you know, missing my… my mother."

"Well, I'm sure that now you're well, Uncle will arrange for transport to get you home." Sasami assured her. Sakuya sighed, shaking her head.

"Until they get to the bottom of this, I don't think anyone is going to let me leave Jurai." She said sadly. "I'm the only one who survived, after all. The only witness."

"I know, but surely they'll let you go to your family?" Sasami asked. Sakuya shrugged.

"We'll see." She said simply. "It might not be that easy."

"I'm sorry I made you think about it again."

"It's okay. It's pretty much always in my mind anyway." Sakuya said quietly. "Don't worry about it, Sasami-chan."

"If you're sure." Sasami sent her companion a troubled glance, and for a while they walked in silence beneath the clear blue Juraian sky. As they drew nearer to the copse of trees Sasami had mentioned, a movement in the branches of one of the wood giants made her glance up, letting out an exclamation as she recognised the space pirate perched up above them.

“Ryoko! Oh, come down and say hello to Sakuya!” She called. There was a rustle of leaves and Ryoko materialised on the ground in front of them, casting the young princess a smile.

“Hi, Sasami. I didn’t see you coming.” She said amiably.

Sasami grinned.

“And you’ve been climbing trees again — Ryoko, you’ve got leaves all in your hair.” She scolded, reaching up on tiptoes to pull the offenders out. “There. Sometimes I think you do things like that just to annoy my Uncle and my Father.”

“Perhaps I do.” Ryoko bantered back. “So who’s this? Sakuya, did you say?”

“Sakuya Kumashiro.” That girl said quietly, meeting Ryoko’s curious gaze with an opaque one of her own. “Pleased to meet you, Ryoko-san.”

“Ryoko is a sort of cousin of ours, Sakuya.” Sasami explained, amusement glittering in her crimson eyes as she considered the nature of the connection. “We have the same ancestry… kind of.”

“Then perhaps I should say Ryoko-hime?” Sakuya looked apprehensive. “I don’t want to be rude.”

“Ryoko-san is just fine.” Ryoko said frankly. “I’m no Princess.”

She frowned, eying the stranger carefully.

“So you’re Sakuya Kumashiro.” She added. “The miracle girl who survived a ship full of murder unharmed.”

Sakuya flinched, and Sasami shot Ryoko a reproachful glance.

“Ryoko, Sakuya’s Father died on that ship.” She said, and there was on mistaking the reproof in her tone. “She didn’t escape it unharmed. She lost people she loved, so don’t talk about it so bluntly. She doesn’t want to think about it at all.”

“I see.” Ryoko pursed her lips, eying Sakuya keenly. “I’m sorry. I tend to speak my mind… no offence meant.”

“None taken.” Sakuya said softly, and Ryoko frowned.

“I’m sure you probably want to get off this rock as soon as possible, don’t you?” She remarked. Sakuya nodded.

“If they can arrange it, yes.”

“Aren’t you afraid that something might happen again?”

“Why would it?” Sakuya looked startled. “They already killed my father — what else could they do?”

“Well, there’s still you.” Ryoko said casually. “Although you were there the first time — so I suppose if they’d really wanted to finish you off, they would have done so. Don’t you think that’s remarkable, that you managed to hop off that vessel without any serious injury? And yet so many grown men and women perished… right in front of you? I think it’s remarkable. You must be made of pretty stern stuff.”

“Ryoko, stop it!” Sasami exclaimed, as tears glittered on Sakuya’s lashes. “You’re upsetting her… leave her alone!”

“I just find it interesting, that’s all. Don’t you, Sasami?”

“I don’t know how I survived. I don’t know why Father died and Mr Toyonaga and all the other people did. I don’t remember anything about it!” Sakuya exclaimed, tears spilling down her cheeks. “Why does everyone on this planet think I’m hiding something! I’m not hiding anything! I’m just a kid — *leave me alone*!”

With that, she turned on her heel, fleeing across the grass towards the safety of the dense trees and Sasami wheeled on the pirate, sending her an angry glare.

“Why did you do that? Ryoko, she’s unhappy!”

“No, she’s hiding something.” Ryoko said frankly. “Can’t you sense it, Sasami? With your connections to the Goddess, I’m surprised you haven’t seen it already. Sakuya knows exactly what happened on her father’s ship. She’s just not telling anyone, that’s all.”

“You’re being mean and paranoid!” Sasami put her hands on her hips. “Please, Ryoko, not everyone is mean and keeping secrets. Maybe she does remember — maybe it was too horrible for her to talk about. You don’t know — she probably saw her father get killed! Did you think of that? There are thousands of reasons why she doesn’t want to talk about it, and it’s not at all suspicious to me!”

“You don’t feel it? The strangeness around her, like something isn’t right?”

“Of course something isn’t right, Ryoko!” Sasami looked exasperated. “And yes, I feel it and so does Tsunami. It’s because she’s been through such a horrid time and it’s hurt her! Not because of anything else!”

Ryoko was silent for a moment, turning this over in her mind. Then at length she shrugged.

“Well, whatever you say.” She said at length. “If you ask me, she knows a lot more than what she’s revealed so far. You should be careful with her — who knows what they sent her here to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ah.” Ryoko sent her a humourless smile. “Learn to spot a spy when you see one, huh, Sasami? If you don’t understand, ask Tsunami and get her to explain it to you. But be careful with Miss I Stared Death In The Face And Lived. Something doesn’t add up about all this.”

“I think you’re wrong.” Sasami shook her head. “I think Sakuya survived because she hid and she’s been through something horrible so she doesn’t want to talk about it. Not everyone has an agenda, you know!”

“Not everyone is who they claim to be, either.” Ryoko said archly. “Just keep it in mind, kid. That’s all.”

With that the pirate was gone, flickering and blurring out of sight and Sasami clenched her fists, fighting against the waves of indignant anger that welled up inside of her.

“Sometimes Ryoko is too cruel.” She muttered, turning on her heel and heading off in the direction that Sakuya had fled. “But she doesn’t understand. She never really had a proper family so I guess she can’t see what it would be like to lose them. I would hate so much to lose Mother or Father or Ayeka so I know how awful Sakuya must be feeling. And so what if she does remember and she just can’t talk about it? It’s not like Sakuya killed those people, after all. Uncle will solve it and it will be fine — Ryoko didn’t need to go make my friend cry.”

As she entered the copse, she heard the sound of crying and she hurried forwards, finding the other girl huddled at the base of one of the trees. At Sasami’s approach, Sakuya raised her head, and Sasami hastened down to the girl’s side.

“I’m sorry. Ryoko can be blunt sometimes — and strange, too.” She said softly. “I didn’t know she’d say all those things — Sakuya, I’m really sorry.”

“Why was she so mean to me?” Sakuya asked helplessly. “What did I do to make her hate me, Sasami-chan?”

“Nothing. Ryoko just… she gets ideas and when she’s got them, she doesn’t shift them.” Sasami sighed, dropping back against the trunk. “I guess she’s helping Ayeka and Uncle to figure this mess out, so she

wants to find out what you know as well. But it's all right, you know. Even if you do remember something, you don't have to tell them. I mean, if it hurts too much to, you don't have to. I'm sure they'll figure it out even if you don't."

"You're really sweet to me." Sakuya observed softly. "I suppose I never realised Princesses of Jurai could be like this to people from other worlds."

"Of course we can." Sasami said comfortably. "We're friends. And you know what? Just to prove it, I want you to come to the court tonight with me. It'd be nice to have someone my own age there, and Suki has to take care of her mother, so she won't be attending. It's nothing too exciting — just a quarterly gathering — but I'd really like it if you came. And if you don't have anything to wear, I can lend you something of mine. You're about my height, after all. I have lots of dresses and we can go to my chamber and pick one out, if you want."

"Really?" Surprise flickered into Sakuya's aqua eyes, and Sasami nodded.

"Really." She agreed. "Come on. Let's go."

"I'm really not sure that this is such a good idea, Tokimi."

Seiryo leant up against the doorway of his sister's bedroom, a frown crossing his features as his gaze flitted between the two women. "Suki, is it really wise to encourage her? You didn't see how badly those kids were teasing her — I don't want her to get hurt."

"Well, she needs to know that not everyone on this planet is nasty, and besides, she seems to have taken you on as her personal protector." Suki said pragmatically. "I can't go — Mother has been worse today, you know that, and someone has to stay with her. You've taken a hate at these things since you came back to Jurai but the Emperor will expect you to be there. At least this way you won't be on your own."

"But Tokimi is still so fragile." Seiryo objected, and the room's final occupant raised her head at the sound of her name, offering the nobleman a warm smile.

"Tokimi is going with Nii-chan?" She asked. "Suki gave me a pretty dress to wear. Do I look pretty?"

Seiryo sighed.

"You look very pretty, Tokimi." He admitted, and as he spoke the

words, he realised how true they were. Her thick brown hair had been styled back out of her face in a classical Juraian style, lovingly combed and fastened with ribbons woven by Suki's clever, deft fingers. One of Suki's own Juraian gowns had been carefully selected for the former Priestess to wear and its gentle pastel shades highlighted the delicacy of Tokimi's fair complexion. Her sapphire eyes glittered with excitement and anticipation, and as he took in her expression, Seiryo felt his resistance begin to wane. He grimaced, shaking his head.

"All right. She can come." He said at length, and Tokimi let out a shriek of joy, flinging herself on him with little regard for her outfit or the expensive silver jewellery Suki had fastened around her throat. "Woah, Tokimi, calm down! It's not going to be that exciting, you know. It's just a gathering — there's one every season and all that happens is that people get together, representatives greet one another from the quarters of Jurai and that's about it. Sometimes there's dancing and speeches and things of that nature — but it's not really even a party. Just one of the mundane things that Council members are required to attend, even if they don't ever attend any other court functions. You might be very bored."

"But Tokimi *can* go with Nii-chan?" Tokimi raised questioning eyes to his, and Seiryo nodded, gently disentangling himself from her grip.

"Tokimi can go with Nii… I mean, with *me*." He corrected himself, a rueful look touching his expression as he caught Suki's eye. "After all, you look too pretty to stay home. But you *must* stay with me, Tokimi. No wandering off, all right? And if I say we go, then we go home. Is that understood?"

Tokimi nodded her head, eyes shining.

"Then it's settled." Suki laughed. "You're taking Tokimi as your date to the Council Quarterly and I'm taking care of Mother."

"It is not a date." Seiryo said frankly, shooting his sister a reproachful look. "And that's not particularly elegant language, Suki, for a lady of Jurai."

"I'm sorry." Suki did not look at all peturbed. "I suppose I acquired it from Sasami. She knows all kinds of fun words, Seiryo, and Jurai is so fussy about high society language. It gets boring."

Seiryo snorted, and Tokimi stared at him, confusion in her blue eyes.

"What is date?" She asked. Seiryo shook his head.

“Never you mind. Suki is being silly.” He said firmly. “Well? Are you all ready? We should probably make a start, if we’re going to walk over that way before it begins.”

“One more touch.” Suki said thoughtfully, plucking a flower from the vase on the windowsill and cutting the stem short with her fingernail. Carefully she slipped the blossom into Tokimi’s gleaming hair, offering her a smile.

“There. Now she’s ready.” She decided. “You both have a good time, and say hello to Sasami for me. I’m glad I’m not going — all those people — but I’ve abandoned her and I’m sorry.”

“I’ll pass the message on, don’t you worry.” Seiryo assured her. “I’m sure Lady Sasami will understand that at times like this, family has to come first.”

“Seiryo, is Tokimi going to stay with us permanently now?” Suki asked, perching on the windowsill as Seiryo carefully fastened a warm cloak around Tokimi’s shoulders, following suit with his own. “Because I know you brought her here on a whim, but… well…”

She faltered, her cheeks pinkening, and Seiryo grinned.

“You like having her here?” He asked playfully. Suki nodded self-consciously.

“Even though I know she’s older than both of us, it’s like having a little sister.” She admitted. “I was an only child for so long, when you were away — it was so lonely. And I know Tokimi is hurt and she might not get any better than this. But she is happy and cheerful and enthusiastic about things. I like her being here. She makes things seem easier — especially when Mother’s health has not been so good.”

“Yes, it’s strange, but she does have that effect.” Seiryo eyed Tokimi thoughtfully, as that girl ran curious fingers over the fastening of her cloak. “Almost ironic, that even now I feel tied to her in some way. Isn’t that strange? You would think it’d be the last thing I’d want — having her constantly around. But I don’t know… I suppose that it does feel like she’s another sister. Especially since you *both* now call me Nii-chan.”

He spread his hands.

“We’ll see.” He added. “I don’t mind her staying here and if she’s happy, it seems to be a logical solution. She can’t stay at the palace and Washu-sama won’t be here forever. I suppose it just remains to be seen whether Lady Washu will take her back to the Earth, now she’s recovered. But so long as she’s on Jurai, Suki, I have no objection to

her making her home here."

"Good." Suki looked relieved. "I wasn't sure if you brought her here just because you had to. I'm glad you want her to stay too."

She reached up on tip-toes to give him a kiss goodbye, then squeezed Tokimi gently by the hand.

"Be good tonight." She said softly. "All right?"

Seiryo chuckled, slipping his hand into Tokimi's as he reached for the door, pushing it back.

"I almost wonder if that advice was for me or for her." He said wryly. "Good night, Suki. Take good care of Mother for us — we won't be back too late."

As he led Tokimi out into the bright, clear moonlight, Seiryo shot his companion a pensive glance, taking in her childlike curiosity at her surroundings and the contrast of the silvery moon against the midnight sky. Inwardly he wondered whether she would ever be all right again, and his mind flitted to the encounters within her base on Kihaku, where the clinical, decisive Goddess-in-waiting had given so many firm commands. He frowned, pursing his lips.

"But which one is the real Tokimi — or is it neither one of you?" He murmured aloud. "And if you do get better, what then? Will you continue to be this person — or the one you were before?"

There was noone to bring him his answers, and as they reached the lamplit entrance to the Royal grounds, he hesitated, wondering once more whether this was really such a good idea. Tokimi had no such qualms, however, and she offered him a grin, pulling him towards the music and lights that led the way inside.

"All right, I'm coming. Calm down." He chided. "We don't run riot around the palace. The King of Jurai will be here, no doubt, and other members of the Royal Family, also. You need to be on your best behaviour — these are the people who let Tokimi stay on Jurai, so make sure they see you're being good."

"The King of Jurai?" Tokimi's eyes became big for a moment, then she nodded. "I would like that. To see the King of Jurai."

"Well, I doubt you'll be able to miss him, this evening." Seiryo said ruefully, as they stepped in through the elaborate archway and into the huge function hall. "He's over there, on the stage at the far end — dressed in maroon and cream and with a coronet on his head. Do you see him? That's the Emperor Azusa. He's the King of Jurai."

“Azusa, the King of Jurai.” Tokimi repeated this thoughtfully, then she nodded. “And he lets Tokimi stay on Jurai?”

“That’s right.”

“I must say thank you.”

Before Seiryo could react, Tokimi had pulled free of his grip, hurrying across the hall towards the stage where Azusa and his younger brother were deep in conversation. Despite the merriment of the occasion, the black and maroon of Haru’s robes indicated that technically the court were still in mourning for the Sumire deaths. Azusa’s expression was entirely in contrast with the vibrant robes he wore as indication of his status at the Quarterly gathering, and as Tokimi reached them, both men started in surprise, staring down at her with very mixed expressions.

As Seiryo caught up to her, he was able to see the non-plussed look on the Emperor’s face as Tokimi bowed her head before him, then raised her gaze to meet his.

“Thank you to the King of Jurai.” She said, in slow, proper tones. “To let Tokimi stay here.”

“Tokimi, I told you once already that you weren’t to leave my side.” Seiryo took her gently by the arm, offering the Emperor an awkward smile as he made his bow. “Azusa-heika, I’m sorry. She… she…”

“Wanted to say thank you.” Azusa said softly, tilting his head on one side as he regarded his ward carefully. Then he rested his hand hesitantly on Tokimi’s shoulder.

“You’re feeling better, then, Tokimi-san?”

“I am well. Thank you, King Azusa of Jurai.” Tokimi said seriously. Azusa smiled, nodding.

“That’s good. I appreciate your thanks.” He said gravely. He was rewarded with a wide beam, and Seiryo pursed his lips.

“If you run off again, Tokimi, I’m taking you home.” He said warningly. “You’re lucky that the Emperor is an understanding man — it’s not polite to go running around official halls and accosting Kings without ceremony.”

“I did something bad?” Tokimi stared, and Seiryo sighed, shaking his head.

“No.” He said resignedly. “Come on. You’ve said thank you to the Emperor — now let’s go and find Lady Sasami and pass on Suki’s

message, okay?"

"Okay." Tokimi nodded her head, and as he led her away from the dais, Seiryo was aware of the two senior princes of the realm discussing them as they moved away.

"I didn't think he'd bring her to an event such as this." That was Lord Haru, and instinctively Seiryo bristled at the censure in the man's words. "We don't know how much we can trust either of them, in truth, my brother. Is it wise, letting her roam so freely around Jurai?"

"Lady Washu assures me Tokimi is of no further threat, and Lord Tennan has done nothing to alert my suspicions." Azusa's answer was more comforting. "If you don't forgive, Haru, you turn lukewarm allies into hot-blooded enemies. And even if her mode of address was unusual, she wanted to thank me. The girl is impaired — we know that her experiences have probably scarred her for life. That she is able to be up and around is a miracle enough in itself. Let it rest. We have enough troubles to contemplate without adding a Kii refugee to the list."

"Perhaps you are right." Haru conceded, but to Seiryo it did not sound like the Chief of Security was convinced. "I would still have liked to have used truth serum on Tennan-dono. I'm still not convinced over the death of his good father… and his continued association with that woman makes me uneasy — impaired or not, I am unsure she should be so easily trusted."

"The matter has been closed." Azusa's tones warned there would be no further discussion on the matter, and Seiryo felt a sudden surge of appreciation for his King's strong will. "For now, we must resolve the Kanemitsu murders and lay those ghosts to rest. We are dealing with a present demon, not past ones. And for tonight, perhaps we can let it all rest and try and remember other matters."

By this time they were out of earshot, and Seiryo sighed, turning his attention to scanning the room for the younger Princess. An exclamation from his companion told him that Tokimi's bright eyes had spotted her first, and he turned, meeting Sasami's gaze and acknowledging her wave with a bow of his head. Tokimi waved back, and as Sasami approached, Seiryo saw she had someone else in tow. It was a young girl, no older than the Princess herself, and try as he might Seiryo was unable to put a name to her face. He frowned, his brow creasing in confusion. Was she from one of the colonies? A representative's daughter from a noble house that did not usually attend?

A sudden shriek from Tokimi brought Seiryo back to the present with a jolt and as he glanced at his companion, he saw that she had gone rigid, colour draining from her face as she brought her hands up before her in a curious gesture of protection. She said something but it was in words he did not understand, and he frowned, following her gaze as he tried to work out what it was that had startled her. Try as he might, however, he could only see the Princess and her young companion in Tokimi's line of sight.

"Tokimi?" He murmured. "Tokimi, what on earth is the matter with you? It's only Lady Sasami — why are you so upset?"

Tokimi repeated the strange words, adding to them a string of others as she became increasingly agitated. She took a step back against the wall, her hands held up before her as if to defend her from some unseen enemy. The pitch of her voice rose and Seiryo was aware that where there had been a hum of chatter before, there was now nothing but silence as every gaze in the room turned to the former Priestess and her sudden fit of panic.

"Tokimi? Tokimi, what's wrong with you!" Immediately Sasami hurried forward, grabbing the woman by her hands but Tokimi pulled away, terror in her sapphire eyes. In her fright, she had lapsed completely into her native tongue, rendering her words incomprehensible, and suddenly Seiryo wished that Washu were here. A quick glance around the chamber, however, told him that the scientist was nowhere in evidence and he cursed, slipping his arm around the distraught girl's shoulders as he urged her to calm down.

Tears glittered on Tokimi's lashes as she buried her head in Seiryo's shoulder, gripping hold of him tightly as if afraid to let him go.

"Lord Tennan, what is wrong with the girl?" Lord Takaya's imperious voice broke the silence and Seiryo turned, eying his council colleague with thinly veiled dislike.

"If I spoke Kii, I'd tell you." He said quietly. "Although if you'd like to have a go at translating, please, be my guest."

Takaya bristled, glaring back at his equal, but before he could respond, Tokimi glanced up at Seiryo, pulling desperately on his arm as she tried to get his attention.

"Nii-chan, demon." She sobbed. "Demon kill Tsunami. *Demon kill Tsunami*!"

This last proclamation was loud enough for the majority of the hall to overhear and a loud gasp went up from those near enough to see

Tokimi's wild gestures and distraught state. In her panic, she had flung her free arm in Sasami's direction, and in the hotch-potch mixture of Kii and Galactic tongue that followed, even Seiryo had trouble trying to piece together what his charge was trying to tell him.

Sasami, for her part, had frozen at Tokimi's words, colour draining from her face as she digested them.

"*Tokimi?*" She whispered. "What… what do you…?"

"Lady Sasami, please, step away from her!" Takaya stepped neatly between the Princess and the former priestess, his hand hovering over his sword hilt as he did so. "Lord Tennan, you shame the court by bringing this creature into our midst! Did you not hear the words from her own lips? She means evil towards Jurai's noble Goddess Tsunami, even as she seeks shelter within our own walls!"

"No! No, Lord Takaya, she didn't say that!" Sasami protested, but Takaya was well into the swing of things by now and he took no notice of the girl's words. "She should have been put to death for her crimes when the Tsunami-fune brought her back to Jurai!"

Tokimi stared at the angry lord with big, frightened eyes at this, and Seiryo could tell that she understood. He frowned, stepping forward and holding up his hands.

"Tokimi is wounded." He said quietly, but his words were pitched so that they would carry as easily as the belligerent tones of his fellow Lord. "Her mind is impaired. She doesn't understand the crimes you talk about, Lord Takaya — nor does the guilt rest with her for any of them. She is not capable of launching an attack on anyone. She is scared, that's all. Something frightened her — are you so paranoid about the antics of one scared girl that you are willing to spill blood over it? That's little better than spilling the blood of a child!"

"You would know about spilling blood, Lord Tennan!" Lord Hirata shot forward now, eyes blazing with indignation as he recognised a chance to raise a personal grievance. "You threatened my own boy with violence within this palace conclave within the last few days! Or do you deny that you promised to silence him if he dared speak his mind about the demon within our midst?"

"I advised him it would be better to keep his mouth shut about your opinions regarding our noble Emperor's choices of counsel." Seiryo's eyes flashed dangerously at this. "And that if he dared lay a finger on Tokimi, I would speak for him. No man of honour would act aggressively towards an injured foe, whatever their nature or their crimes. Tokimi is a woman with the mind of a child. To attack her

would be compounding those crimes threefold."

"Are you claiming I have no honour?" Lord Hirata was incensed, and Seiryo spread his hands.

"You tell me, Lord Hirata." He said darkly. "You tell me."

"Stop this! Stop this, all of you!" Azusa strode between them at this moment, and even Lord Hirata's indignation was quelled into silence by the presence of the Emperor himself. "Lord Tennan, what is the meaning of this disturbance?"

"Tokimi saw something that scared her, my Lord. That's all." Seiryo said quietly.

"Demon kill Tsunami, King of Jurai." Tokimi added brokenly, her eyes big and uncertain as she tried to work out what was going on. Her gaze flitted across the room, as if searching for something, and Sasami took her gently by the hands.

"Tokimi, stop it." She begged. "Stop being scared. There's no demon. It's all right. It's really all right."

"You heard her, my King. She seeks to undermine the principles upon which this world is founded!" Lord Takaya exclaimed, and Azusa frowned, meeting Seiryo's gaze soberly.

"Lord Tennan?" He asked softly. "How do you interpret Tokimi's words?"

"In the same way as any rational man, my Lord King. In the way in which she said them." Despite the fact he was speaking to his Emperor, Seiryo could not keep the rancour out of his voice. "Tokimi saw something that upset her. There are a lot of things on Jurai she doesn't yet understand. Kihaku was a world lacking in technology and many Juraian customs are alien to her. Her memories were damaged in the explosion of her planet, and she doesn't remember anything beyond the death of her father the Priest. That's all."

He bowed his head towards Azusa, then,

"I'm sorry for the disturbance, my King, but Takaya-dono and Hirata-dono are keen to blow the matter out of all proportion."

"Well, I think…" Azusa began, but at that moment, Tokimi let out another blood-curdling shriek, exclaiming wildly as she gestured desperately once more in the direction of the Princess and her startled companion. As Sakuya stepped out from Lord Takaya's shadow, Tokimi's actions became even more agitated and Seiryo was aware that his companion was physically shaking with fear.

“Tokimi! Stop this!” The nobleman said firmly, but Tokimi wasn’t listening to him. In rapid Kii she repeated the same sentences over and over again, her hands fluttering in curious gestures as she backed further and further across the room towards the door.

“Why is she pointing at me?” Sakuya was becoming upset now, her eyes widening with alarm. “Why… what’s wrong with her? Is she mad?”

“She’s quite, quite mad.” Hirata said in disgust. “And probably just as dangerous now, putting curses on innocent children.”

“She’s not putting a curse on anyone!” Seiryo objected, but the other lord snorted.

“You tell me then, what she’s doing.” He said, a nasty tone edging his voice. “Putting a curse on poor Sakuya-san after she’s already suffered so much. It would be no surprise to me if Tokimi wasn’t responsible for all of those murders, and she seeks to finish what she’s begun!”

“Sasami, I’m scared! She’s scaring me!” Sakuya swallowed hard, tears in her own eyes. “Maybe… maybe Lord Hirata is right. I think… I think I saw her… somehow…”

“There, you see!” Hirata exclaimed, triumph in his eyes as he gestured towards the near-hysterical Tokimi. “A witness! Tokimi is our killer, Lord Azusa! She should be arrested forthwith!”

“Nobody is arresting Tokimi.” Seiryo said blackly. “She hasn’t done anything and she didn’t commit any murders on the Sumire. You are sensationalising a young girl’s tragedy, Hirata-dono, and it’s a base tactic at the best of times. Miss Kumashiro doesn’t remember what happened aboard her father’s ship, and you seek to pervert justice by putting ideas into the child’s head.”

“I seek the truth!” Hirata began, but Tokimi let out another wail of terror, drowning anything else the Lord might have added to his self-important speech.

“Tokimi-san, please!” Azusa tried, but it was to no avail. With a final heart-wrenching cry, Tokimi turned on her heel, fleeing the chamber altogether and Seiryo muttered a curse, pushing past Hirata as he hurried after her.

“I knew this was a bad idea. I knew she wasn’t ready for all these people.” He muttered. “But what about what she said? Did she really see a demon? Am I right in thinking that she has the power to see the thing that Detective Makibi is hunting? Or is she just a frightened,

deluded child?"

Behind him he could hear chaos erupting, as many voices clamoured for the ear of the Emperor, but Seiryo was beyond caring.

"They already hate me beyond repair, and I don't care enough for any of them to bother about their good opinions." He reasoned aloud, surprised by the truth of this statement. "But I do care that Tokimi is upset, because… well, why do I? *Why* is she so important to me? Is it because of everything we've both been through together? Because I'm the only one who understands how that magic poisoned her soul? Or is it what Suki said — she's become like a sister in the short time we've cared for her, and there is nothing I wouldn't risk to protect Suki from harm? I wish I knew. And right now I wish I could tell which way Tokimi had gone. She might get lost so easily, when she's upset, and Suki will be cross with me if I don't bring her home safely. I have to at least try and calm her down."

"Tennan-dono! Stop right there!"

A determined voice came from the darkness behind him and he swore under his breath, swinging around to find Lord Hirata glaring at him, his face silhouetted by the gleam of the Juraian moon. He returned the glower with one of his own, his stance stiffening as he registered the glint in his foe's eye.

"What do you want, Hirata?" He demanded flatly. "I have more important things to do than talk to you."

"You have to find your demon and do homage to her, instead of honouring your Emperor here, where you are bound by oath to attend." Hirata said coldly. "You are a traitor and a villain and you should have been so sentenced when those crimes were brought against you six months or more ago. Azusa-heika was lenient on you, and you abuse his generosity. Now you not only consort with demons, you seek to protect them within the walls of the Palace!"

"The only demon I see is you." Seiryo spat back. "Strutting around like a peacock, pretending to be important. Just like my father. Just like all the others. I don't care what your opinion is of me. It's never mattered anyway."

"Your father was a good and honourable man who sought justice for Jurai against Kain and who was brought down in his prime by your hand!" Hirata snapped. "We all know it, even if we cannot prove it. Seiji-dono was a true Lord of Jurai. You are a poor comparison."

"But a better swordsman than you, I'd wager." Seiryo said quietly.

“Since I trained with the best at the Galaxy Police, and I’m not afraid to use my weapon if I have to. I don’t seek a fight, Lord Hirata, and I am not going to dishonour my Emperor by scrapping with you outside the palace. But until you have some firm evidence other than your own superstitions to lay at Tokimi’s door — or at mine, for that matter — keep your mouth shut. Treason comes in many forms, and accusing without proof can be seen as a crime in itself.”

His eyes narrowed.

“My father’s records indicated many conflicts with you over land and title, in the distant past.” He added softly, his eyes glittering with dislike as he spoke. “Including at one point a negotiation for your son to marry my sister Suki, which my mother thankfully blocked from taking place. No wonder you have such animosity towards me… although hanging onto a grudge such as that is pitiful to say the least. Surely you know that it would have meant Suki married beneath her? Do you really think a Tennan would ever consent to that?”

Hirata bristled, reaching for his sword, but Seiryo was too quick for him, drawing his own blade and knocking his foe’s weapon cleanly from his hand with one flick of his wrist. It clattered onto the ground, and with a pointed look, Seiryo returned his sabre to it’s scabbard.

“I’m not fighting you.” He repeated. “You’re not worth it, and I need to find a frightened girl who has nowhere but here to call home. Go back to the Emperor and tell your tales on me. I will prove my loyalty to my King with actions, not with tattled words about my superiors.”

With that he turned on his heel, his cloak fluttering around him as he headed purposefully across the palace conclave, leaving his rival standing staring after him. Though Hirata called his name once or twice, Seiryo remained oblivious, his attention wholly on seeking out his frightened charge and at length his persistance was rewarded, as he caught sight of a stretch of dark fabric pooling on the ground beneath one of the big Conclave trees.

“Tokimi?” He said softly, and there was the sound of a muffled sob.

“Tokimi, it’s Seiryo. It’s all right. Please, come out. I’m all alone and noone is going to hurt you.” He said gently, and with a rustle of clothing and tree branches, Tokimi stepped out from her hiding place, her cheeks stained with tears and her beautiful hair pulled loose around her shoulders. Despite himself, Seiryo felt a tug as he saw the genuine anguish in the girl’s blue eyes and he held out his hands.

“Shall we go home?” He asked. Tokimi hesitated, then slowly, she

nodded, taking his hands in hers.

“They didn’t want me there.” She said soberly, dropping her gaze to the ground. “They were angry. Like the others. They don’t like Tokimi. Tokimi isn’t wanted on Jurai, is she?”

“Tokimi, there are some very stupid people on Jurai.” Seiryo said with a sigh. “Believe me, they don’t like anyone. Don’t take it to heart. They don’t even like each other most of the time.”

“Does Nii-chan like Tokimi?” Tokimi asked plaintively, and Seiryo nodded his head.

“Of course I do. And so does Suki. And Washu and Lady Sasami, of course.” He replied. At the mention of Sasami’s name, alarm flickered into Tokimi’s sapphire eyes.

“Tsunami!”

“Shh… not now.” Seiryo shook his head. “Tomorrow you can tell me what happened, but right now you’re tired and upset, so we’ll get you home and not worry about it. Okay?”

“Okay.” Tokimi looked relieved. “I am tired. But… but you *will* tell Tsunami? What I said?”

“Well, I…”

“Please!” Tokimi begged, and Seiryo sighed again.

“All right.” He agreed reluctantly, inwardly wondering how on earth he was going to keep such a promise. “Now calm down. It’s quite safe out here… just you and me. Nothing to be afraid of.”

“That’s probably a matter of opinion.”

A voice from behind them startled them and Tokimi let out a shriek, gripping Seiryo’s hand so hard that he winced. There was the sound of laughter, and Seiryo spun around, annoyance glinting in his malachite eyes as he met the interloper’s amused gaze.

“Detective Makibi, why are you following me?” He demanded. “Do you really trust me so little that you have to stalk me everywhere?”

“No, not at all.” Kiyone shook her head. “Actually, I came to offer my help. And I hope, to make sense of what happened tonight, too.”

“You were there?” Seiryo stared at her, taking in for the first time his companion’s unusually formal attire. He frowned, absorbing the fact that not only was the Detective wearing a very feminine, form-fitting dress, her thick dark hair had been braided back with ribbon in

a delicate style and she looked completely unlike the woman who had accosted him about the Sumire earlier in the week. Kiyone snorted at his question, gesturing at herself as she did so.

“No, I dress like this for fun.” She said sarcastically. “Sasami invited me. Ayeka didn’t go, because she and Takeru are still working on this Kanemitsu business, and Sasami guilted me into attending. I certainly didn’t expect to see Tokimi there — but at least now I’ve seen for myself what her situation is.”

“Are you a friend?” Tokimi eyed Kiyone curiously, reaching out a hand to touch the detective’s cheek. “Friend of Nii-chan?”

“Friend of…?” Kiyone blinked, and Seiryo looked rueful.

“Well, I guess you could say we used to work together, Tokimi.” He said vaguely. “This is Detective Kiyone Makibi. She’s a Police Officer… she helps to catch criminals.”

“When I’m not forced to take leave on Jurai.” Kiyone muttered, smoothing down the skirt of her gown and then bending to fiddle with the heel of her shoe. “I hate formality. If Ayeka hadn’t bullied me, I would never have been badgered into wearing this. But she said that one of us might as well go there and look pretty… and I guess I got talked into it. I feel like I’m being strangled.”

“You don’t look like it, if I may say so.” Seiryo looked amused, feeling a tiny flare of malicious pleasure at her discomfitted blush. “So what is your decision, Detective, regarding Tokimi? Are you going to join the court hysterics, or are you going to remain true to form and forge your own path?”

“I think it’s blatantly obvious she saw something in that hall.” Kiyone said bluntly, abandoning her shoe as she considered his question. “And that any fool can see that Tokimi isn’t capable of hurting anyone. Which I’m glad of, because it rules out in my own mind any risk of her being involved. Or you, for that matter. I guess I knew you weren’t, but it’s nice to put the idea to bed once and for all.”

“Your faith in me is overwhelming.”

“Do I need to answer that?”

“No. It wasn’t a question, as I’m sure you noticed.” Seiryo said simply. “And Tokimi? Fling your hate at me if you like, but not at her. She doesn’t understand it, so it will do you no good.”

“I don’t hate Tokimi. I’m not angry at her.” Kiyone said primly. She

turned to the former Priestess, offering her a smile as she held out her hands.

“I’d like to be friends, Tokimi.” She added. “If you want.”

“Friends.” Tokimi’s eyes lit up and she squeezed Kiyone’s hands in return. “Yes. Detective Makibi, we’ll be friends.”

“Call me Kiyone. After all, that’s what friends do.” Kiyone sent Seiryo a pointed look at this juncture, then, “May I walk with you back towards your estate, Tennan-san? I’m curious to know what exactly Tokimi saw and if it’s the thing you said she saw the other day.”

“No.” Seiryo held up his hands, and Kiyone looked surprised.

“I already said we weren’t going to tackle this tonight. Tomorrow, you’re welcome… but not now.” Seiryo shook his head. “Tokimi’s been too badly upset for one night, between those apes Hirata and Takaya and whatever else was in that hall. I won’t have her upset again — Suki will be furious as it is.”

Kiyone shot him a startled look, and Seiryo was surprised to see a brief flicker of respect dart across the detective’s blue eyes.

“You do care what happens to her, don’t you?” She asked softly. He nodded.

“Tokimi is my responsibility… and in a way, like my family, now.” He agreed pensively. “We’ve both been victims of the same dark magic, and we’ve both been ostracised because of it. It gives us something in common, but she can’t defend herself as well as I can. So I’ll defend her, too… because she needs me.”

Kiyone’s eyes narrowed at this, and at first she didn’t respond. Then, at length, she shrugged.

“I’ll still walk with you, if I may.” She said eventually. “Help you get her home. It has to be better than going back to that hall, with all those paranoid, clucking nobles making a fuss.”

She shivered.

“Or with whatever it was that Tokimi saw still roaming around. No, on balance, I think I’m safer with you.”

Seiro shot her a bewildered look, but spread his hands.

“Be my guest.” He said simply. “Let’s go.”

“Well, who would have thought it would turn into such a fun evening.”

Back at the palace, Ryoko took a final sip of her drink, setting the glass down on a nearby abandoned tray as she observed the commotion of voices that still occupied the centre of the chamber. “I thought Jurai prided itself on it’s sophistication and social restraint… but I guess they can put a show on as good as anyone, when they choose.”

“I don’t think that’s the point, Ryoko.” Tenchi chided her, shaking his head slightly as he cast a glance in the Emperor’s direction. “I’m almost wondering if I should go help Great Grandpa to calm things down. Lord Takaya and Lord Hirata sure are noisy when they get going.”

“They like the sound of their own voices, like most Juraian nobles.” Ryoko dismissed this with a flick of her fingers. “And they’re too superstitious by far. I’ve encountered Hiratas and Takayas with similar attitudes in the past — only then it was me who was the demon, not Tokimi.”

“What do you think really happened?”

“I think that Washu might have a point about Tokimi.” Ryoko said unwillingly. “Not that I like to admit I might be wrong, or that my mother might be right. But one thing is for sure. She isn’t the one behind all of this stupid Sumire business. Whatever she was screaming about tonight, she has less subtlety than Mihoshi. She’d never be able to pull it off.”

“Poor Tokimi. I wonder if she’s all right.” Tenchi pursed his lips. “And that child, too — whatever Tokimi said upset her as well… as if she hasn’t been through enough.”

“Well, if you’re going to wade in and join the pity party, I’m going to love you and leave you, I think.” Ryoko decided. “You might think that child Sakuya is all sweetness and light but I’m absolutely certain she was sent here to spy on Jurai somehow, and I’m not going to waste my time or my sympathy on her when there are others to do it instead.”

“How can she be a spy?” Tenchi objected. “She’s Sasami’s age.”

“So?” Ryoko snorted. “You don’t think a thirteen year old can spy? I’ve news for you. They can and believe me, if the incentive is right, they do.”

“So what — her Dad was killed and now she’s trying to find out

something about Jurai as a form of revenge? She believes Azusa is guilty somehow?" Tenchi demanded. "That does seem a bit farfetched, even for you, Ryoko-chan."

"Thanks." Ryoko pulled a face at him. "And no, I didn't mean that, exactly. I think she was always a spy — that's why that Kumashiro guy brought her along. Sasami might be the Goddess but she has a major weakness for befriending strays. Don't you think it's convenient otherwise, how that girl was here tonight with Sasami?"

"No, I think Sasami has a big heart and she reached out to her. That's all." Tenchi shook his head, and Ryoko sighed.

"Do you never, ever have suspicions about people?" She asked. Tenchi grinned.

"Not if I can help it. I leave that to you — between us we reach a rational middle ground." He bantered. "But in this case, Ryoko, I think that you're seeing things which aren't there. Sakuya might have been brought here in the first instance to help her father's political battle, but in the final analysis, she's now all on her own. She has no communication with Kanemitsu, either… not even with her mother. In light of that, don't you think it's unlikely she's a spy?"

"Perhaps." Ryoko sighed. "But mark my words, Tenchi. There's something odd about that child, and Tokimi saw it too. I have no idea what all that babbling was about, but whatever it was, I'll bet she wasn't freaked out by the colour of Sakuya's dress."

"Tokimi is still very fragile."

"That doesn't mean there's anything wrong with her eyes."

Ryoko sighed, glancing down at her hands.

"But the King will hush it up, because it's not seemly to have such things happen at formal events, so I guess it won't matter either way." She added ruefully. "If you don't mind, Tenchi, I'm going to cut out of here and go back to my room. It's nothing against your company — actually, you're more than welcome to join me, if you like. But while the court of Jurai are on a demon hunt, I'd rather not be their next focus. No wonder Washu avoids these kinds of functions. Clearly they're just an excuse for all of the planet's nutcases to get together and victimise someone."

"I'm sure they wouldn't go for you, Ryoko. Not these days." Tenchi shook his head, but Ryoko shrugged.

"Let's not chance it." She said simply. "Are you staying to help

Azusa calm the mob?”

“I think I ought to, since I need to be in his good books, remember?”

“Then I’ll see you later.” Ryoko kissed him on the cheek, offering him an impish smile. “If you miss me, you know where you can find me — in my room or outside under the stars. Have fun with the round-up. I’m sure it will be a whole lot of fun, trying to talk sense into arrogant rich men!”

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

The palace grounds were peaceful that evening, with everyone of any importance already involved in the events within the function chamber, and Ryoko found that nobody accosted her as she walked quietly beneath the branches of overhanging native trees. The moon sparkled and glimmered overhead, and the clear dark sky was punctuated by a multitude of glittering white specks, pulled together in constellations that few Earth-born astronomers had ever had the fortune to see.

As she walked, she reached the stone ruins that had once marked Tsunami's royal shrine, and she glanced at it, remembering absently how when she had been a small girl, she had darted in and out of here when it was quiet, using it almost as a secret base when people were looking for her for one crime or another. She had not appreciated the divinity of Jurai's goddess then, and even now, knowing Sasami in the flesh, she reminded herself ruefully that there were things to be found wanting.

"Sasami can't see dangers that are right in front of her." She mused. "Or am I just being paranoid? Maybe I am. It wouldn't be the first time. But I'm sure that girl is weird, somehow. Not right… like…"

She frowned, pursing her lips as she tried to make out in her own mind what it was that had bothered her so much about Sakuya Kumashiro.

"It's not that I've seen the girl before. She's a complete stranger to me and I've never been near enough to Kanemitsu to have encountered her family." She reflected at length. "There's not much to steal there that's of value to a space pirate. So what, then? Something else? Tokimi saw it too, so surely I can't just be imagining it. Or maybe Tokimi is just distressed, like Tenchi thought. I'm sure that's not it, though. I'm sure there's something else. I just wish I could put my finger on why she bothers me. Something doesn't fit the picture, and I don't know what it is. Her appearance? Her attitude? Her… her what? Think, Ryoko. You used to be so good at un-earthing police spies in pirate garb. You're not going to let a thirteen year old fool you now, are you? You can do better than that!"

But despite it all, the answer would not come. She groaned, closing

her eyes in frustration as she drew on an image of the girl, picturing her in her mind's eye the way she had been on their first encounter. She pursed her lips thoughtfully.

"Something in her manner. Something I've seen before. Somewhere." She mused softly. "That's what it is. A tone of speech — an inflection… maybe even an accent. A way in which she moves or… uses her hands when she speaks. Oh, this is hopeless. I've met millions of people. How am I going to remember just one? And besides, she's Sasami's age. How old must that have made her when I met her? Nine? Ten? Younger still? Bah. It's probably just a coincidence. Maybe Tenchi *is* right. Perhaps this really is raving paranoia."

A sound from the darkness made her falter in her analysis, her eyes snapping open as she instinctively froze. For a moment nothing seemed to move, and then, out of the corner of her eye, Ryoko saw a dark shape flitting from tree to tree. At first the pirate thought that the figure was trying to avoid detection, but, as she observed the other person's movements more carefully, she realised that the opposite was true. Whoever was stalking her through the darkness fully intended to make their presence known… the bizarre creeping through the black was simply a game played by a hunter following its prey.

Despite herself, Ryoko's heart skipped a beat and she tensed, preparing herself for an assault, but none came. As swiftly as the black shape had appeared, it also disappeared, and Ryoko sank back against the trunk of a tree, closing her eyes as she let her breath out in a rush.

"Hallucinating." She muttered. "What was in that drink? Maybe that's what got Tokimi's goat tonight. Bad Juraian alcohol. I wouldn't put it past Azusa to be cheap, not when he has so many people coming to drink their way through his cellars."

A sudden rush of air from behind her told her that her initial assumptions had been correct, but before she could react, a pair of thin, pale hands shot out from the other side of the tree, clamping themselves around her throat and pulling her back against the wood. There was a sickening thud as Ryoko's skull made contact with the tree trunk and she gasped for breath, momentarily dazed from the blow and unable to struggle free. As the grip around her throat tightened, sharp nails dug into her skin, and the sudden jolt of pain jerked Ryoko back to her senses. She teleported out from her vulnerable position, hovering high above the trees and glaring down on her silent foe as she flickered light from her fingers.

"You chose to attack the wrong space pirate tonight, whoever you are!" She exclaimed, anger glittering in her golden eyes as the light

flared into her familiar amber sabre. “Sneaking up behind someone is not nice — at least come out and fight me fair and square, instead of skulking around like a coward!”

A blast of white energy shot out from the darkness, blowing a branch off the tree and narrowly missing Ryoko herself. For a moment she gaped, taken aback by the force of the blow, then she rallied herself, sending a volley of orange light in response.

“Nice try but not close enough.” She spat back, hovering closer as the assailant drew their hands together, a translucent forcefield glimmering and strengthening around them as they harmlessly deflected Ryoko’s attack. “What is your problem, anyway? I wasn’t doing anything wrong! What is it with this planet? How long do you hold grudges for, anyway? So I looted a few outpost planets years ago — big deal! Get over it already!”

There was no verbal response, but another blast of white light flared out from the ground below, and Ryoko dodged it deftly, preparing for another assault of her own.

As she drew closer to the attacker, however, her sabre flickered and died and horror flitted through her expression as she recognised her assailant’s features. In the violent exchange of blasts, the interloper’s thick hooded cloak had been knocked back and for the first time Ryoko saw the face of her attacker. She muttered a curse, drawing her hands together as she summoned her own forcefield, defending herself from the angry white blasts.

“Dammit, Ayeka, what are you trying to *do* to me?” She exclaimed, disbelief in her eyes as she registered the determined, fixed expression on the Crown Princess’s face. “I thought we had a truce! Are you that fixated with Tenchi still that you’re willing to try and eliminate me rather than let me marry him?”

A fresh wave of white beams came flying in her direction and instinctively she ducked, letting the attack glance off the edge of her protective shield.

“Get a grip!” She snapped, drawing on her own strength as she prepared herself for another volley of electric energy. “We may have a truce, Ayeka, but I’m not going to just hold up my hands and let you kill me without a fight. You want a battle, you got a battle. You’ve never properly bested me before and you’re not going to do it this time, either! I don’t care if you *are* the Crown Princess of this tinpot planet. You’ve made me mad!”

Her sabre flared once more between her fingers and with a yell she

charged at Ayeka, colliding with her and knocking the woman off her feet. Ayeka struggled, fingers clawing at Ryoko's skin and despite herself, Ryoko yelped at the strength and the determination in Ayeka's murderous grip. Her blade faltered as she realised this battle would not be settled by magic, but by superior physical strength, and that — at least for one of them — it had turned into a battle to the death.

Pain and a sudden, wet sensation across her arm told the pirate that even while she had been struggling to get a better grip, Ayeka had drawn a sword from somewhere within the swathes of her cloak, slashing through the sleeve of Ryoko's gown to the flesh below. Wincing, Ryoko bit her lip against the cry that rose in her throat, instead forcing her arm free of Ayeka's clawed hand, focusing all her energy on removing the Princess's weapon from the equation. As she did so, she finally managed to push Ayeka back onto the grass, pinning her firmly in position with her knees as she made a desperate grab for Ayeka's sword. Her fingers closed around the hilt and she tossed it aside, energy flickering across her hands as she considered her next move, but before she could do anything, she registered the change in her companion's expression. The glassy, determined eyes flickered with sudden confusion, and Ayeka let out a feeble murmur, as if waking from a deep sleep.

Bemused, Ryoko sat back, and Ayeka struggled into a sitting position, raising her hand to her head as she did so.

"Ryoko?" She murmured, followed by, "Why are you sitting on me?"

She caught sight of her fingers, letting out an exclamation as she registered the bloodstains across her nails and the seeping red liquid that had spread across the sleeves of Ryoko's gown. Further raw marks across Ryoko's throat and shoulders gave her the appearance of having been savaged by a wild animal, and horror flooded Ayeka's gaze as she interpreted what the two things meant. She gazed up at the pirate in abject alarm.

"Did *I*…?" She whispered.

"You owe me a big explanation." Ryoko said frankly, shuffling back to allow the Princess to stand. "And if you try that again, I *will* blow your head off. I was tempted to do it this time, but Tenchi wouldn't have liked it, and I'm not in the habit of killing people. Not even when they try to kill me first."

Ayeka blanched as Ryoko's words sank in, and despite the dim moonlight, the pirate was half afraid that her companion was going to

faint. She held out a hand and hesitantly Ayeka took it, sending her companion a stricken, guilty look.

"I don't remember." She whispered. "I don't remember anything… what… what did I *do*?"

"Aside from try to throttle me, stab me and blow me to bits?" Ryoko arched an eyebrow, her adrenalin fading as she realised all immediate danger was past. The gash in her arm stung and she winced, glancing down at the stained, torn fabric with a rueful grimace. "You know, I'm hard enough on clothes without you wrecking them for me. This is one of the few nice gowns I have left… thanks a bunch."

"Did I… are you badly hurt?" Ayeka bit her lip, tentatively touching the spreading stain, and Ryoko flinched back.

"Leave it. It's a scratch. It will heal." She said frankly. "But not if you poke your dirty, bloody fingers around in it. What's more important is why you turned into Ayeka the Wild Beastie of Jurai. Anything else can wait, because I don't like being ambushed in the dark by someone I'm supposed to consider a friend!"

"But I really don't know." Ayeka said helplessly. "I was up in the Council chamber, going over those police reports one more time. I told Uncle I'd never be able to focus on tonight's festivities, so he gave me permission to miss them and continue pursuing this other matter. I think I must have fallen asleep, because it all gets a bit murky from there."

"Asleep?" Ryoko opened her mouth as if to denounce this, then she remembered the glazed expression in Ayeka's eyes. "Geez, are you serious? You were asleep the whole time?"

"I… I think I must have been." Ayeka looked guilty. "I haven't been sleeping that well as it is, if you want to know. I have a vague sensation of chasing something — some kind of monster through the trees. Something that sought to hurt me… but that's all. And then I woke up and you were sitting on top of me and… and here we are."

"Boy, do you need therapy." Ryoko muttered, examining the wound on her arm with a rueful grimace. "No wonder you and Takeru don't share chambers, if that's what you do in your sleep."

Ayeka flushed red at Ryoko's words, shaking her head.

"I'm just under so much pressure." She murmured. "I… I'm sorry, Ryoko. I must have thought you were the monster in my dream. You just got in my way at the wrong moment, that's all."

“Well, actually, you got in mine.” Ryoko said flatly. “I was here, just minding my own business, and you were stalking me through the trees. At least, I assume it was you. You don’t invite friends to these hallucinogenic slumber parties of yours, do you?”

“Ryoko, stop it!” Ayeka protested. “I’m bemused enough without you being that way about it!”

“How am I meant to be?” Ryoko demanded. “Maybe you were asleep — but you tried to damn well kill me, Ayeka! You’re dangerous!”

She fingered her throat gingerly. “If I hadn’t been able to teleport, you’d have throttled me on the spot. I didn’t cross your path. You crept up behind me and tried to crush my windpipe!”

“I’m sorry!” There were tears in Ayeka’s eyes now and despite herself Ryoko sighed, shaking her head.

“We’re not getting anywhere like this.” She realised. “Come on. We’ll go to my room and we’ll talk about it where noone’s likely to walk into the middle of our discussion and wonder why the Crown Princess and Lord Tenchi’s fiancee are dishevilled and covered in blood.”

Ayeka flinched at her companion’s careless choice of words, but nodded her head, biting her lip as she fought to contain her emotions.

“All right.” She said quietly. “That seems a logical idea to me, too.”

“Good.” Ryoko frowned, then reached out a hand, taking Ayeka by the arm and focusing her thoughts on her chamber, back at the palace. As she re-materialised them both in the centre of the room, an anxious mew from the bedcovers told her that Ryo Ohki was awake. The small, furry creature leapt up onto Ryoko’s shoulder, arching her back at Ayeka and letting out a warning hiss. Ayeka swallowed hard, sitting down shakily on the end of the bed.

“I’m sorry, Ryo Ohki. I didn’t mean to hurt Ryoko. I don’t even remember what happened.” She said sadly. “Please, try to forgive me. I know that she and I used to fight a lot, but I wouldn’t act that way now.”

Ryo Ohki flicked her ears, then turned her attention to licking Ryoko’s wounds clean, causing the pirate to wince as her sharp, rough tongue brushed against the raw flesh.

“Ryo Ohki, that stings.” She scolded, but there was more affection than reproach in her tones, and secretly she was glad of the creature’s

gentle fussing. Ryo Ohki's buzzing thoughts helped to calm her shattered nerves, and she curled up between her pillows, crossing her legs as she made herself comfortable on the quilted coverlets.

"Should she do that? Won't it make it worse?" Ayeka asked hesitantly. Ryoko shook her head.

"Ryo Ohki's saliva is sterile." She said simply. "And she's well used to seeing me with battle scars. Although not usually in this kind of situation."

"I know." Ayeka glanced down at her hands. "I need to wash these. I can't believe I… I really throttled you? Those marks — my nails really…?"

"Yes, Ayeka, they did." Ryoko said quietly. "But you truly *don't* remember, do you?"

"I told you that!" Ayeka exclaimed, getting to her feet and running the tips of her fingers in the mirror pool that stood at the far side of the room. "Do you really think I'm that crazy, or that dishonourable? To sneak up behind you like a coward and then to try and end your life? We may have had our battles, Ryoko, but do you really think that I'm a potential killer?"

"Honestly, no." Ryoko owned. "But I did wonder if Tenchi telling you our news might have unhinged something in your brain."

"Tenchi?" Ayeka stared at her, a look of horror in her eyes. "Will you tell him? I mean, about this?"

"Not necessarily." Ryoko eyed her keenly. "But I was right about one thing, wasn't I? You are still hot on my fiance."

Ayeka sighed, sinking back down onto the bed.

"I am a married woman and Tenchi's concerns are not mine." She said wearily. "I wish you both every happiness, Ryoko… I backed out of that equation a long time ago, when I accepted Takeru's offer of marriage. Things haven't changed, and I always knew that it would end up this way. So no, the news hasn't unhinged me. I am happy for you."

"Bull. You hate the whole idea."

"Not hate." Ayeka raised her gaze, meeting Ryoko's amber eyes with sombre red ones. "I won't pretend it has me jumping for joy, but I can accept it. That is a part of my past, and Tenchi is both friend and family to me. I began to think that you were, also… so I have moved on."

“Well, me too, until you tried to dissect me.” Ryoko sighed. “Some advice — get a manicure. Those things are lethal.”

“It wasn’t on purpose.”

“So tell me what you do remember. Just chasing a monster in some kind of vague dream?”

“I suppose so.” Ayeka buried her head in her hands. “But it isn’t the first sleepwalking incident I’ve had recently. Since this business with the Kanemitsu ship got piled onto my workload, I’ve not been sleeping too well at all. The other night I woke up at the foot of Tsunami’s tree, and I have no idea how I got there. I was dreaming that Sasami was a prisoner in her branches, and I had a sword with which I tried to cut her free. When I woke, the sword was with me and there was a gash in Tsunami’s trunk… but Sasami wasn’t there. She was asleep in bed — which is where I should have been.”

“Well, at least I feel better knowing that I wasn’t being singled out for your homicidal dream walking.” Ryoko said ruefully. “But you really don’t handle stress well, you know that? Maybe this is a sign that you should take life a bit more easily.”

“I know, but it’s hard.” Ayeka agreed sadly. “Because Uncle is always relying on me to help him and I know it’s his way of testing me. One day all his cares will be mine. I can’t be found wanting.”

“And you can’t be found wandering around the palace with the intention of killing innocent pirates or trees, either.” Ryoko pointed out. “Even in your sleep.”

“True.” Ayeka owned. “But how do you stop doing things that you don’t even know you’re doing? Sleepwalking isn’t exactly something you choose to do, and I’ve never had anything like this happen before. Not as far as I remember, anyway.”

“Perhaps you should go see one of these whiz doctors your Infirmary is meant to have on roll.” Ryoko suggested. “Or speak to Washu. She might know. She’s something of an expert on brain weirdness these days.”

She flinched, reaching up to pluck Ryo Ohki off her shoulder.

“All right, enough of that.” She told the cabbit firmly. “I know you mean well and you want to help, but you’re rough and it’s fine. I’ll see to them myself, soon.”

Ryo Ohki mewed reproachfully, and Ryoko smiled, ruffling her companion’s fur.

“Yes, I know it’s your job to look out for me.” She said affectionately. “But it’s all right. Make friends with Ayeka, huh? She looks like she needs it more than me at the moment.”

Ryo Ohki hesitated, eying Ayeka warily, and the princess sighed.

“She doesn’t trust me. And why should she? I tried to kill her mistress.” She said bitterly. Ryoko shrugged.

“She’ll forgive you.” She said with a smile. “Because I’m going to — at least, I am this time. If you do it again, I might not — but as it happens, you didn’t damage anything important. Scratches will heal, and I wasn’t even wearing Achika-sama’s ring this evening, so it’s safe and sound, locked away where nothing can touch it. I took it off when we went exploring the Sumire and I haven’t worn it since. Although if you’d damaged that, I might find it less easy to be magnanimous.”

“Lady Achika’s ring?” Ayeka pursed her lips. “Tenchi gave you that? When he asked you… that question?”

“Yes.” Ryoko looked surprised. “Apparently it’s an Earth tradition — they give rings to symbolise betrothal. She wanted him to have it, to form a bond with someone like she had with Otousan. So when Otousan gave it to him, he gave it to me. I’m terrified of losing it, or breaking it, if you want the truth. I don’t usually care about things — money’s there to be spent, food to be eaten, and all of that. But this means a whole lot to me… so if you’d wrecked that, we wouldn’t be having a nice calm chat about it in the safety of my chamber. Believe me, you’d have taken a few more bruises first.”

“Otousan…” Ayeka faltered, and Ryoko looked self-conscious.

“Noboyuki-san.”

“I know who you meant.” Ayeka frowned. “You call him Father so easily. You really are part of the family now, aren’t you, Ryoko? It’s more than just Tenchi — you’re a part of something else, too. With Noboyuki-san and Lord Yosho and… well, everything on the Earth really is your world now.”

“I’d say so.” Ryoko nodded. “Does that bother you, then? Knowing that?”

“Perhaps a little.” Ayeka raised a faint smile. “When I feel like everyone is going away from me, I’m realising you have so much that I don’t. Ironic, isn’t it, that a Crown Princess should say that to a former space pirate? But I think it’s true, anyway. You have this free, peaceful life on the Earth. You have Tenchi, and his family, and yours too, now Washu is there with you all the time.”

“And that’s not always a benefit.” Ryoko interjected darkly. “Believe me, there are advantages to an absentee mother. And what do you mean, anyway? You have Lord Haru, Lord Azusa, Lady Misaki, Sasami. You have Takeru, who adores you, if you weren’t too blind to realise it. You’re way too picky, you know.”

“I know how Takeru feels. It makes me sad, because I hurt him so easily.” Ayeka groaned, running her fingers through her hair. “I want to let go of Tenchi for good, Ryoko. Have him be my friend, my cousin, and no more. But yes, I suppose I am still jealous. Even though I knew — even though I counted myself out of the equation. I suppose I do still love him. Even after all this time.”

She faltered.

“Are you going to get mad at me, now I’ve said that?”

“No… I don’t have to.” Ryoko said pragmatically, settling herself up against the bedhead with little regard for her bloodsoaked clothing. “Tenchi is mine. That’s beyond dispute. I’m not insecure about it any more, Ayeka. It’s like you said. I belong.”

She grinned, shrugging her shoulders.

“And you’re just an idiot.” She added. “You have your knight in shining armour and you don’t even appreciate him. You’re a fool, Ayeka. Tenchi would never have made you happy, yet you pine after him anyway. And Takeru could — but you won’t let him. No wonder you’re sleepwalking. You’re screwed up inside that royal head.”

“When did you start giving people life counselling?” Ayeka asked acerbically, and Ryoko laughed.

“Since you started falling apart at the seams?” She countered. “But I am serious. You should take what you have and be happy with it.”

“I know.” Ayeka owned. “But… well, we’ll see.”

She shrugged.

“I will not cause trouble for you and Tenchi. I have no intention of doing so, and I would rather Tenchi knew nothing of this confession of mine tonight.” She added. “Talking to you about it has helped, I think — it has been knotting up inside of me, and perhaps now that is resolved between us, I can turn my mind to my duty. I suppose I feared that if you knew I still loved him, you’d try and prevent me from ever seeing him. But maybe I was wrong.”

“He sees you all the time.” Ryoko replied. “And once it would have bothered me, but events more recently changed that. That’s all. It was

sort of proved to me that no matter what happens or tries to come between us, it's not going to drive us apart. So I'm all right. And Tenchi wants to be friends with you. So fine. Be friends. Go to town — knock yourself out. Just try and remember you have a husband in all this, huh? You should take advantage of that while you can — he's not going to be young and virile forever, you know."

"Ryoko!" Ayeka flushed red at her companion's innuendo, and Ryoko laughed.

"Well, you know I'm right." She said unrepentantly. "Chaste and innocent Princesses of Jurai might be, but you've been married almost a year. You've no excuses not to take advantage of him now — he practically belongs to you, all things considered."

"Why do you always have to be so vulgar about things?" Ayeka asked plaintively. "It's not a nice thing to discuss so casually, you know."

"Not even among family?" Ryoko's eyes glittered with amusement. Ayeka shook her head.

"No, certainly not." She said firmly. "It's not proper, so don't tease me."

"Fine, be that way." Ryoko shrugged. "It's not my problem. Tenchi and I do just fine. But you'll have to face up to it sooner or later, you know. Or Jurai is going to struggle with that whole finding a royal heir thing."

"It's none of your business!" Ayeka retorted indignantly, and Ryoko eyed her keenly.

"It'll be your first time, I guess." She said thoughtfully. "I suppose that accounts for it — though you can put it off way too long, you know."

"*Ryoko!*" Ayeka exclaimed, and Ryoko chuckled.

"All right, I'm done." She relented, holding up her hands in a gesture of submission. "But think about it, even if you don't want to talk about it. We're not children. It's something you need to face up to, sooner or later — and you might as well have Takeru while he's there to be had. You could do a whole lot worse."

"You are so impossible sometimes." Ayeka muttered.

"Hey, remember who tried to kill who tonight." Ryoko objected. "You owe me a little teasing, at the very least."

“I suppose.” Ayeka sighed, getting to her feet and smoothing imaginary wrinkles from the skirt of her gown. “I should go back to my own room — or no, to the Council Chamber, because Takeru will wonder where I’ve been.”

“If he was with you, wouldn’t he have noticed you sleepwalk out of there?” Ryoko arched an eyebrow. Ayeka shook her head, moving towards the door.

“No, he went to make a communication with the military outpost that discovered the Sumire.” She replied. “I remember him leaving… that must have been not long before I fell asleep.”

She sighed, stifling a yawn.

“If I wasn’t so afraid of repeating the episode, I might go straight to bed, but I don’t know what I might do.”

She slid back the door, letting out an exclamation of surprise as she realised that the corridor was not as empty as she had expected.

“Tenchi?”

“Ayeka!” Tenchi sounded confused, stepping into the chamber and stopping dead at the sight of his fiancee. “Ryoko? What the hell happened… are you all right?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Just a few scratches.” Ryoko said flippantly, meeting Ayeka’s troubled gaze with a nonchalant one of her own. “They’re pretty vicious, those royal trees.”

“You look like something attacked you.” Tenchi came to sit on the edge of the bed, touching the bloodstained sleeve gently. “Are you sure you don’t want to go to the Royal Infirmary and have it looked at? You’re a mess — really, it looks like you’ve been gored!”

“Really. I’m all right — there’s more blood than there is injury.” Ryoko said dismissively. “It makes it look worse, but really, it’s no more than a few scratches.”

“Well, if you say so.” Tenchi looked doubtful, but he did not press the matter any further. Instead he turned his attention on the hesitant Princess, offering her a smile.

“What brings you here, Ayeka? I’ve just seen Takeru and he’s looking for you.”

“Ryoko and I were just… talking.” Ayeka said slowly. “And I suppose I lost track of the time. I will go find him now. Thank you, Lord Tenchi.”

She bowed her head towards him, then left the chamber, sliding the door shut behind her, and Ryoko let out her breath in a rush.

“So why *are* you in my chamber tonight, *Lord* Tenchi?” She asked playfully. “Surely you’re not planning to be bad.”

“No… sorry to disappoint you.” Tenchi sent her a crooked grin. “I actually came to make sure you were all right. With everything that happened this evening, I suppose I was a little bit spooked. But… maybe I wasn’t overreacting — because you’re a bloody mess.”

“You know exactly what to say to make a woman feel attractive and special, Tenchi-kun, you know that?” Ryoko grinned at him, winding her arms loosely around his neck and kissing him gently. “As you see, there’s nothing much wrong with me. But I’m grateful for your concern, whatever brought it on.”

“I just had a feeling…” Tenchi paused, then, “Ryoko, what was Ayeka doing here? Were you talking, like she said? She seemed troubled when she left. Preoccupied.”

“We were.” Ryoko agreed. “But I’m not telling you what about. It was girl stuff, and none of your business. You wouldn’t be interested, anyway.”

“I see.” Tenchi looked non-plussed.

“You had a feeling I was in danger, Tenchi-kun?”

“Yeah… like a premonition.” Tenchi agreed. “I know it sounds crazy, but I just…”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“But you’re all right. So I guess it was nothing.”

Ryoko eyed him tenderly for a moment. Then she kissed him again, very gently, on the lips.

“No, it wasn’t nothing.” She murmured. “Something did happen tonight, other than just me walking through the trees. And I will try to explain, when I can. But right now — I can’t, not really. It will have to wait.”

“I’m not understanding.”

“No, I know.” Ryoko eyed him regretfully. “But I made a promise and I’m going to try and keep it, at least for now.”

“Well, if you say so.” Tenchi touched her cheek, eying her thoughtfully. “Do you want me to look at your arm? It’s cut at an

awkward angle — I could help you clean it up."

"I think it's better I do it — Ryo Ohki's already tried to help out but it hurt and I'd rather inflict pain on myself than have someone else do it." Ryoko shook her head. "They're just scratches, but they sting like mad in this cool air. And if you're not here to be naughty, Tenchi, I think I'm going to turn in and get some sleep. It's been a long and tiring night, and I'm exhausted."

"Me too, though I'm not sure why." Tenchi admitted, getting to his feet and pausing to look at her one more time.

"Are you sure you're all right, on your own?"

"I can defend myself, Tenchi. And I'm not in any danger. I'm fine, I told you."

"But you just said…"

"I know. It's complicated. But it's all right." Ryoko shook her head. "I'll be okay. And Ryo Ohki is here. She'll look after me — she has one heck of a bite, if you make her angry. Just ask Haki — why do you think he called her a rat?"

Ryo Ohki mewed, rubbing affectionately up against her mistress at this backhanded bit of praise, and Tenchi grinned.

"I suppose you are in safe hands — or paws — with her." He acknowledged. "All right. Then I'll see you in the morning. Sleep well, Ryoko-chan."

With that he was gone, and Ryoko pursed her lips, meeting the cabbit's enquiring gaze.

"Should I have told him?" She asked, and Ryo Ohki flicked her ears, curling up against her. Ryoko nodded her head.

"I know. I promised Ayeka, and I don't think she did it on purpose." She agreed slowly. "But if she's done it twice now, I almost think someone else should know. Just in case next time whoever she jumps on isn't so lucky."

"This is getting to be a worrying precedent."

Washu unwound her cloak from her shoulders, setting it down over the back of a nearby antique chair as she cast her sleeping sister a troubled gaze. Though it was late and the clock had long since chimed for midnight, Seiryo had made the decision to rouse Washu from her work immediately and within a few minutes the scientist had arrived

at the Tennan estate, anxious to know exactly what had happened this time. When Seiryo's messenger had reached her, she had been in the process of preparing for bed, and thick waves of red hair scattered across her shoulders over the hastily pulled on outdoor clothing she had donned before setting out. Somehow, Kiyone thought, with her hair fluttering loose from it's normal ties and her usual neat appearance nowhere to be seen, Washu seemed a lot less the eccentric genius and far more the anxious family member called out in the middle of the night to visit a sick relative.

"Tell me again what happened. And why, exactly, you thought it was a good idea to take Tokimi into something like that in the first place."

"That was my fault, Washu-sama." Suki glanced up guiltily from her perch beside Tokimi's bed. "I encouraged Seiryo to take her and she seemed so eager about the whole thing. I didn't realise it would upset her so badly — I'm sorry."

"Well, what's done is done, now." Washu sighed. "Poor Tokimi. So many things that can easily confuse her. Seiryo-sama, what did she tell you she saw?"

"She didn't, exactly." Seiryo admitted. "She said something like 'demon kill goddess' and she said it several times. She said a lot of things in Kii, too, but obviously I couldn't make that out."

He frowned, a look of frustration entering his malachite eyes, and once again Kiyone was struck by the nobleman's genuine concern for Tokimi's well-being. She frowned, pursing her lips.

"Tennan-san thinks that whatever she saw wasn't in her imagination. He thinks that it's the same thing that's been involved in the Sumire incident and I agree with him." She said quietly. "Do you think that's possible, Washu? That somehow a creature could conceal itself from our sight, but not from Tokimi's because she's a Kii?"

Washu eyed Kiyone keenly, interest in her gaze, and despite herself, Kiyone flushed red.

"What?" She demanded. "It's true. That is what we think."

"I was just surprised to see *you* here, of all places. That's all." Washu shrugged. "As for your question, I don't see why not. It would make sense. If we assume that this is the same creature you told me about, that saw to the people on the Seniwan ship, then I did mention that we might be dealing with some kind of psychic entity. If I'm correct, well, I suppose concealing itself from general view would be a

piece of cake."

"What entity? What case?" Suki glanced between the detective and the scientist nervously. "I don't understand. I thought that Tokimi had just got herself spooked… and Detective Makibi was supposed to be on Jurai on holiday. What else is going on that I don't know about — is something dangerous going to happen on Jurai?"

"We don't know yet, Suki-chan." Seiryo said quietly. "But not if I can help it, I promise you that. I've no mind to let you or Mother or Tokimi get hurt if I can prevent it."

"We don't really know anything, that's the truth of it." Washu said with a sigh. "Suki-sama, you know that people were killed aboard a spaceship heading to Jurai, don't you?"

"Yes. The court has been in general mourning." Suki agreed. "Although I don't know all of the details, it was a terrible tragedy."

"And no accident. The passengers and crew of the Sumire were murdered." Washu continued gravely. "Before she was… *sent* here, Kiyone encountered a similar occurance on patrol in space, where the crew of a spaceship were also murdered in the same way. That there's a connection seems clear. Ironing out the rest of it is a bit more difficult… I'm afraid we've been utilising your brother's experience as a Galaxy Police Elite Agent in order to try and get a better grip on the situation."

"But Seiryo isn't an Elite any longer." Suki looked anxious. "Nii-chan, what if you get found out? You could get into even more trouble! Especially after tonight — Azusa-sama may already think both you and Tokimi are somehow involved in whatever's been going on!"

"Perhaps, but it's a risk I'm going to take, if it means keeping you and Okaa-sama safe." Seiryo said frankly. "Besides, not doing anything would make me complicit in anything else that followed. I have certain skills I learnt when I was at Headquarters and I'm putting them to use. That's all."

"And what if Lord Azusa decides to arrest and interrogate you? What then?" Suki was close to tears, and Seiryo shook his head impatiently.

"Not going to happen. The Emperor has no evidence and fortunately for all of us he doesn't like throwing people in cells without at least some to back up his case." He said quietly. "He might have had the world on me before, when I was in Tokimi's service, but

this is a different matter. Suspicions don't amount to a conviction, and at the end of the day we are all acting with the same end in mind as he is. We want to resolve this matter before anyone else gets hurt. Don't look so worried, Suki. I know what I'm doing and nobody is going to be arrested."

"You told me not to worry the last time." Suki muttered. "And that almost got your land and title stripped from you. How am I supposed to be comforted when I find you're dabbling in things you shouldn't be again?"

"Where files, facts and figures are involved, I'm not likely to get out of my depth." Seiryo offered her a rueful smile. "I was not a bad agent, Suki, unless you've forgotten. I didn't earn those plaudits except by being good at my job."

"This is all very well, but it doesn't explain what we're dealing with." Kiyone sighed. "Washu, you've been around a long time and you know a lot of things and people. If this killer is using psychic magic to conceal themselves from people's sight, well, do you have any idea where they might have come from? What worlds have that kind of ability?"

"Psychic magic isn't exactly rare, Kiyone." Washu sighed, perching on the windowsill as she leant idly back against the heavy woven drapes. "If you come to it, Ryoko and I both have it to some degree. If I'd learnt my magic properly, and if Ryoko had been trained from infancy, either one of us could probably attain some level of psychic manipulation. As it is, we've both let that side of our power go to waste. But my point is that many worlds who operate on a magical basis have psychic capabilities. Even here on Jurai it's not an uncommon trait. Most, if not all the people who can raise Jurai's power also have a telepathic predisposition. In fact, every member of Jurai's royal family has something of one, in order to be able to bond with and communicate with their tree-ship."

"We're not talking mundane ship-flying psychic magic, though, Washu-sama. We're talking about something a lot bigger." Seiryo said thoughtfully. "That should narrow it down, shouldn't it?"

"Not really." Washu shrugged helplessly. "Anyone with a predisposition towards psychic ability can be trained to the very highest levels. The fact that most aren't is neither here nor there. It doesn't change the fact that there are hundreds of planetary systems from which our creature might have originated. Even from here on Jurai."

“But why do all of this?” Kiyone asked helplessly. “That’s what I don’t understand. Why kill those people on the Seniwan ship? Why were they even there? Why come aboard Yagami and start stalking me across space — why do that, if I’m a threat? Is that file really so important to it that it’ll keep me alive until it knows what we know? Why kill the agents at Headquarters — just because they transported me, or for some other reason that we don’t yet know about? What about the Sumire? What was the point of that little adventure? And why leave that girl alive, when everyone else on board was killed? What’s the point of any of this? I really don’t understand.”

“It seems the answer lies in that file, Seiryo-sama.” Washu shot the nobleman a sidelong glance, and Seiryo sighed, nodding his head.

“I know, and if I had access to my ship, I’d have broken through the encoding by now.” He said wearily. “But it’s slow going when I’m trying to do it piece by piece. It’s Old Era Juraian and heavily coded — more than one layer and method is being used to conceal the file’s contents. I believe I can do it, but I don’t know how long it’s going to take. It’s not so simple as I first imagined. Kuramitsu-san has involved at least three different styles of encryption and I’m only just beginning to break through the first layer.”

“The Unko…” Washu looked thoughtful, and Suki sent her an apprehensive glance.

“Seiryo isn’t allowed aboard the Unko.” She said firmly. “If he goes near it it’s in breach of his hearing settlement and he could be thrown in prison again.”

“I wasn’t going to suggest that he did.” Washu rubbed her chin pensively. “Kiyone, have you been aboard this Unko of Seiryo-sama’s?”

“Once, but only very briefly.” Kiyone looked startled. “When I first started trying to discover what was going on at Headquarters six months ago. Why?”

“Would you say it was similar to Yagami in terms of controls, or otherwise?”

“I doubt it’s anything like Yagami.” Kiyone shook her head. “It’s a very elaborate, top-of-the-range craft. *Someone* was compensating for something.”

She sent Seiryo a pointed glance at this juncture, taking some pleasure from the rueful one he sent her in return. “I doubt they have the same operating system, even if they were both Galaxy Police

assigned. Why?"

"I was wondering how simple it would be to hack into, that's all." Washu said flippantly. "No doubt I could do it, but I was curious to know how difficult it was likely to be."

"Hacking?" Suki looked horrified, and Seiryo shook his head slowly, putting his hand on his sister's shoulder.

"Maybe you shouldn't listen in, if you don't like what's being said." He said gently. "Then at least if something goes wrong, you can tell the Emperor you knew nothing and he'll have to believe you."

"I'm not going anywhere." Suki said obstinately. "But I think you're being crazy. It's a huge risk, even bringing the Unko into the equation."

"And if Tokimi did see whatever this demon creature is tonight, and also at the Infirmary, we need to act." Washu said grimly. "Even without knowing clearly what she saw, it's fairly evident that she considers it dangerous and more importantly, she's given us a new target to consider."

"She has?" Kiyone blinked. "Meaning?"

"Sasami-chan, of course." Washu sighed. "That poor girl, with so many things already hanging over her. While the creature is hunting you down, Kiyone, in search of the file Seiryo and I each have a copy of, there has to be a bigger reason why it's here. If it's gone to all this trouble to cover it's tracks and reach Jurai, there must be a reason for it doing so, and I am sure the reason is within this file. But while we have nothing else to work with, I'm going to go with the premise that this thing is after our little Goddess-in-waiting. Like Tokimi, like Kagato, and like others before them, it seeks to destroy Tsunami-kami-sama."

"Sasami-chan!" Suki's eyes widened with horror. "You think this horrible thing has come here to kill her?"

"I do." Washu said grimly. "And whatever Tokimi saw, that's what she was trying to tell us. She didn't mean that something was literally killing the Goddess. She was just using the only words she could think of to tell you, Seiryo, that Sasami was in danger. When she's agitated, she forgets her Galactic Tongue and lapses into Kii. Like as not it was all she could manage."

"But why would I know that Goddess meant Sasami?" Seiryo looked non-plussed. "It's a bit of a leap."

“Not for Tokimi.” Washu shook her head. “Sasami told me herself that Tokimi sees her as Tsunami-kami-sama… in fact, I’ve heard her refer to Sasami as Tsunami on occasion, too. She seems to find it hard to remember that we don’t use that name on a daily basis. She recalls what happened on Kihaku, when Tsunami reached out and touched minds with her. To her, Sasami simply *is* Tsunami. It doesn’t need to be any more complicated than that.”

“But…” Seiryo faltered, and Suki glanced down at her hands, folding them absently in her lap.

“Seiryo-oniichan, Sasami is Tsunami’s chosen one.” She said softly. “I know you don’t believe — have *never* believed that Tsunami was ever a real person and more than just one of Jurai’s legends… a way of explaining the planet’s magic and strength. But she is real, and Sasami is her. She’s the Goddess’s ressurrected spirit — Tsunami-kami-sama in the flesh.”

“That’s not possible.” Colour drained from Seiryo’s face as he digested his sister’s words, and Kiyone eyed him carefully, noting with some surprise the depth of his reaction. “Sasami-sama is a little girl — a Princess, yes, but not… not…”

“Suki-sama is right.” Washu said simply. “It’s a well-kept secret at the moment, but when their assimilation is complete, Sasami will be Jurai’s Goddess and spiritual Guardian, exactly as your sister just told you. Think, Seiryo-dono — remember your mother’s tapestries that hang below us in the halls. Do you not see the resemblance between them and Jurai’s second Princess?”

“Yes, but…”

Seiryo hesitated, shaking his head.

“You are saying that a Goddess truly walks among us, here on Jurai?” He asked falteringly. “And that of all guises, she chooses that of a teenage girl to hide behind?”

“Sasami won’t always be a child.” Washu reminded him. “And in many ways she is more grown up now than most people her age or even older. She has seen things, done things — been forced to understand matters that most thirteen year olds have never had to face. Even her name is a clue to her true identity. Sasami is an Old Era name for Tsunami. She told me so herself — you just need to open your mind and accept that more exists in this world than can be seen by the human eye.”

Seiryo was silent for a moment, and Kiyone could tell that he was

shaken.

“Then Tokimi did seek a real Goddess. She did seek to destroy something tangible, and not just chase a delusion.” He murmured. “I didn’t believe… well, I didn’t know what I believed, to be honest. That such a force as Kihaku had existed, that was enough for me. But that one such as Tsunami does as well — and more, that it was strong enough to bring down and defeat Tokimi when she had a whole planet’s life force at her disposal… it doesn’t rest easy with me.”

“Tsunami is not the kind of vengeful spirit Kihaku was, though.” Washu said gently. “She is a peaceful Goddess, whose interests are protecting Jurai and keeping her people safe from invasion and hardship. You know Sasami, Seiryo-sama. You know her nature now, through her friendship with Lady Suki. Sasami’s nature is Tsunami’s, also.”

“And she gave you Tsunami’s blessing, Nii-chan.” Suki added, sending her brother a faint smile. “When I knew you were in trouble, I asked her to help and she did. By breaking Tokimi’s spell, she brought you back to me and did everything she could to help you have the chance to recover.”

“Did you know about this?” Seiryo sent Kiyone an accusatory glance, and Kiyone spread her hands, nodding her head.

“Word gets around.” She agreed. “You seem pretty freaked out by this, *Lord* Tennan. Don’t tell me you’re scared of people who have more power than you do?”

“Kiyone, right now there are more important things at stake than your private quarrel with Seiryo-sama.” Washu held up her hands before Seiryo could respond, shaking her head admonishingly in the detective’s direction. “I need to work out how to get into the Unko so that Seiryo-sama can access this file and we can know what we’re doing. Suki-sama, you’ve been good to Tokimi and I’m grateful. Please, keep doing so — and for the time being, keep her confined to the Tennan estate. It’s not easy to do, I know, but for her own sake I think she’ll be safer here, away from prying eyes and insensitive comments. Meantime…”

She frowned.

“Meantime we need to get to the bottom of this whole business.” She said decidedly. “Before this demon of hers decides to get her claws into Princess Sasami!”

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

“And yet more problems rain down upon our heads.”

Azusa took his seat with a heavy sigh, casting a grim look around at his surrounding companions. “I can’t see that any progress is being made in terms of investigating the Kanemitsu murders, even with all the work you and Takeru-dono have put into it, Ayeka. Just like with the Galaxy Police case, we seem to have no evidence that anyone was ever aboard that ship. And then, last night…”

“What are we going to do about last night, Azusa?” Haru glanced up from where he had been reviewing a hefty looking document, a dark gleam in his eyes. “Because I for one do not trust Seiryo Tennan as a member of your council. And as for Tokimi — we only have the word of that mad scientist that she’s harmless. Is Washu-sensei really able to be trusted in something like this? Lives are at stake — and we know what the woman was capable of before her arrival here on Jurai.”

“Tokimi appears to have the mind of a child.” Azusa shrugged his shoulders helplessly. “When she accosted us last night, she was as guileless as a little girl — completely unaware of what she was doing. Do you think that she could cover her tracks so easily?”

“We are talking about someone who plotted the downfall of Jurai for centuries.” Haru reminded him. “And who has proven a threat to Sasami and Ayeka both in the past. Naturally, I’m not really happy about leaving it unexplored.”

“I don’t think Tokimi-san is dangerous, Lord Haru.” Takeru said frankly. “I spoke to the doctors and nurses who have treated her since her arrival and up till Lady Washu removed her from the Infirmary’s care. While she was unconscious, they were able to record no brain activity beyond the vaguest flicker — evidence that she lived, but certainly not of the magnitude needed to commit psychic murder. And even since she’s been awake, when she hasn’t known people are observing her, she’s been just the same way as she is when she has company. Simple, gentle and easily confused. I think that whatever she was, it seems unlikely that she has the brain-power left to mastermind anything as skillfully plotted as this.”

“Ayeka, what do you think?” Azusa eyed his niece keenly, taking in the shadowy eyes and the distant expression on her face. Ayeka jerked to attention, blushing as she realised her uncle had asked her a question.

“I’m sorry, Uncle. I was lost in thought.” She said quietly. “Did you ask me something?”

“Only your opinion on Tokimi.” Azusa offered her a smile. “You look tired, my child. You shouldn’t work yourself to death, however keen you are to solve this matter.”

“It’s just preying on me more than it should. It and a multitude of other things.” Ayeka sighed. “Sorry, Uncle. As for Tokimi, I’ve had little time to observe her. But I do trust Washu’s opinion of her condition. If she says Tokimi is harmless, well, I’m prepared to believe she’s harmless. Lord Tennan on the other hand — him I’m not so sure of. He’s hard to read.”

“Well, personally, I think that Lord Hirata’s allegations of violence towards his son must be looked into.” Haru rubbed his temples. “If just to keep Hirata-dono quiet on the subject. Otherwise… Asuza-oniisama, would you authorise me to use truth serum on Lord Tennan? It would ascertain once and for all his guilt or otherwise.”

Azusa sighed, shaking his head.

“No, Haru.” He said quietly. “We’ve used such tactics before to force truth from an innocent and it left me feeling very uncomfortable about how low we had stooped. We have no evidence against Seiryo Tennan. He may be supportive of Tokimi, but we have no indication that their connection is anything more than it seems. And yes, he was belligerent last night, but so were Lord Takaya and Lord Hirata, and I can’t punish one without punishing the others, also.”

“If Lord Tennan does know anything about the murders on the Sumire, he’s too cunning to let anyone realise it until it’s too late to do anything about it.” Takeru said thoughtfully. “As a boy he was a hot-head — he’d pull his sword and challenge anyone on the least excuse. But he’s been away since then and since his return I’ve noticed at least one change in his character. He was always a very private person, too proud to show weakness. But now he rarely shows any emotion at all if he doesn’t have to. His manners are generally impeccable, and he is punctual and hard working. The picture, in fact, of a loyal and honourable member of Jurai’s council.”

“What are you saying, Takeru-dono?” Azusa asked quietly. “That he’s putting up a very clever front to fool us?”

“Biding his time… perhaps.” Takeru admitted. “Honestly, I don’t know. I am afraid to let my own dislike for the man bias my judgement in this matter, but I do not trust his motives. He may have sworn his oath to Jurai, but I’m not sure he has Jurai’s interests at heart. He seems to take part in his duties more automatically than with any real feeling or loyalty.”

“Resentment is a dangerous thing to stir up in one such as that. As I think I cautioned you before.” Azusa sighed. “I am not sure, myself.”

“I still think Seiji-sama’s death was more than suspicious.” Haru said blackly. Azusa spread his hands.

“Perhaps, but without any evidence, that’s another line of enquiry I won’t pursue.” He replied. “No, Haru, we’ll stay in the present. Until we have something conclusive to bring to Tennan-dono’s door, we won’t take any action where he’s concerned. If he’s innocent, it will only put his back up — and if he’s guilty, it will put him on his guard. Meanwhile, I think keeping a closer eye on him might be merited. Not in an obvious sense, but as discreetly as we can manage. If there is something going on with the Tennan family, we will unearth it more easily that way.”

“And if it proves so, Azusa?” Haru asked. Azusa’s expression became sombre.

“You may believe me, brother, that if Seiryo Tennan betrays Jurai’s trust a second time, he will not find me so forgiving.” He said quietly. “Let there be no mistake about it — whoever is responsible for the Sumire murders will face the ultimate justice that this planet has to offer.”

“Where in hell *is* he?”

Kiyone paced up and down Washu’s temporary laboratory, pausing to glare up at the clock that flickered on one of the big screens flanking the wall. Even in the space of a few days, Washu’s electronic contraptions had multiplied in size and number as she made herself more and more at home, and now it was difficult to tell that the chamber had ever been anything but a workshop of invention and curious machinery.

She flopped down into an empty seat, shooting Washu a frustrated look.

“You did tell him to meet us here as soon as the Council session was through?” She asked, not for the first time. “That would have

been at least half an hour ago. What is he doing? *Where is he*?"

"You sound overly keen to see me this afternoon, Detective Makibi."

A smooth voice cut through the conversation, preventing Washu from answering, and the scientist let out a low chuckle as Seiryo himself stepped into the laboratory, causing Kiyone to flush with indignant embarrassment.

"You're late!" She exclaimed. "I thought this was important — or was all that stuff you said last night a bunch of baloney?"

"It is important. And I got here as soon as I could — Council session isn't the sort of thing that ends with a school bell." Seiryo said frankly. "Stop complaining. I'm here, aren't I?"

"You two do amuse me." Washu put in absently from her corner, amusement flickering in her green eyes as she glanced from one to the other. "Arguing like an old married couple. Kiyone, you might want to choose your words better. Anyone who didn't know what we discussed last night might sense some sexual ambiguity about your encounter with Lord Tennan."

"*Washu*!" Kiyone was scandalised, and Seiryo raised an eyebrow.

"Sometimes, Washu-sama, I think you say such things just to get a rise out of those around you." He said thoughtfully. "And I'm not going to oblige you."

"Pity." Washu looked regretful. "Oh well. Kiyone is right, as it happens — you are late. What has the Emperor's knickers in a twist now? Was he talking about my sister's outburst during your session?"

"He didn't mention it once, which seems a bad sign." Seiryo admitted thoughtfully. "But no. The reason it took me so long to get away was because I had to make sure I wasn't followed. Since this isn't something we want to bring to Imperial attention just yet, I thought you'd understand my tardiness better than if I arrived on time with an armed guard in escort. It might be my paranoia, but they seemed especially keen on my actions as I left the hall. I had to go home, and then slip out a back way to get back to the palace."

"Spies, huh?" Washu tut-tutted. "Another low blow from Jurai's desperate King."

"As you say." Seiryo inclined his head slightly. "But in some ways I sympathise. I'm as frustrated as he is. I want to get to the bottom of this too."

“Well, now we’re here, all I need from you is the radio frequency the Unko uses.” Washu turned back to her screen, glancing at it briefly, then nodding her head. “I could randomly try and search it out, but it might attract suspicion if I was to accidentally hit the wrong vibration. I’m assuming that’s information you know, Tennan-dono?”

“Yes.” Seiryo nodded his head. “But it’s an encrypted frequency. There’s an entry code — to protect against people hacking in remotely to my systems.”

“I doubt that will stand in my way.” Washu said confidently. “Decoding files might not be my strength, but hacking ship computers is right up my street.”

“In which case, try a double zero-six-eight frequency, on band A17.” Seiryo came to peer over her shoulder. “But it’s not the kind of system you can walk right through. I’ve been an Elite officer and I had top secret files stored on the computer. It had to be sealed against unwanted intrusion and some pirates and underworld figures have exceptional technological skill.”

“I suppose you’re talking to one of them.” Washu eyed him mischievously, keying in the frequencies and setting her computer to scan the waves for a match. “Ah, here we go. 9983-443-5663-981. Code name, UNKO. Registration: Seiryo Tennan. Status: Docked.”

“I suppose we’ll see if your computer is a match for Washu’s meddling.” Kiyone got to her feet, sauntering over towards the screen herself while all the time keeping a healthy distance from Seiryo himself. “She didn’t have any problem accessing Yagami, and that had police security on it as well.”

“But this wasn’t a police ship. It was my ship, adapted for use within the Galaxy Police. Different thing.” Seiryo said quietly. “I don’t fly in junk.”

“Yagami isn’t junk!”

“And that wasn’t what I said.”

“You might as well have done.” Kiyone’s eyes glittered with anger. “You implied it well enough.”

“My apologies, Detective. I didn’t realise you were so attached to your ship.”

“Don’t be patronising. Just because it isn’t as glamorous as the Unko doesn’t mean it’s useless, or that it deserved to have been

shredded by some unknown demon thing."

"No, but you need the help of *my* ship if you're going to solve what happened to yours — and you need *my* training and knowledge if you're going to clear your name!"

"Kiyone, Seiryo, will you both please grow up?" Washu's tone was impatient, and Kiyone flushed, looking discomfitted as she bit off the retort that simmered on her tongue. "It's amusing for a while, but you bicker worse than school kids. It would be nice if you'd remember that one of you is a Lord of Jurai and the other a highly esteemed Detective of the Galaxy Police… instead of ten year olds spatting over who stole whose lunch. I realise you both have issues to resolve with one another, but put a lid on it, will you? I need to concentrate if I'm going to fool the Unko into thinking I have clearance."

Seiryo eyed her ruefully.

"You really aren't afraid to say what you think, are you?" He observed dryly, and Washu shook her head.

"I'm far too old to bother with niceties when you children are squabbling around my feet." She said acidly.

"Can't Tennan-san access the computer, if you pick up it's frequency?" Kiyone questioned. Washu grimaced.

"Yes, except that he's denied access. Entering his codes would probably alert the Emperor to what we're doing." She replied. "I need to bypass the security and put it offline, rather than use the easy route."

"I see." Kiyone sighed. "That does make it complicated."

"Exactly. So a little more quiet, if you please."

Kiyone sighed, sinking back into her chair as she watched the flashing sequences of data dart up and down the screen. Washu's brow creased in concentration and every so often she typed in long and seemingly uncomprehensible combinations of keys, her eyes never leaving the screen. At length she let out an exclamation of triumph, as the logo of the Tennan family flashed up on the screen, followed by the words "Access granted."

"You're really not bad at this." Seiryo acknowledged. "You're a very dangerous person to have around, Washu-sama — I'm starting to realise that."

"I'm glad you think so." Washu's eyes twinkled. "I do my best. And now we're in, Lord Seiryo, I'm going to hand over to you. You know

the computer and the programs you want much better than I do — it will be quicker if you access them."

"My pleasure." Seiryo nodded, and as Washu vacated her seat, he slipped into it, sliding his copy of the encrypted file disk into the machine and scanning the drives for the program that he needed. Before long he had found it, and as Kiyone looked on, she owned to herself a grudging amount of respect for the swiftness and accuracy of the Unko's computer system.

"If Yagami was being asked to do so much at once, it would probably whirr and groan at me a few times first." She admitted unwillingly. "I guess when you have money to spend, you might as well spend it — and you really did go to town."

"I wanted something I could have pride in." Seiryo pursed his lips, pausing to meet her gaze with a rueful one of his own. "The truth is that I *was* compensating for something, just as you said last night. My father sent me away from Jurai and the trappings of the court of which I was meant to be a part. My status as his son and heir was effectively denied me, so I found another way of exhibiting it, that's all. The Unko was my way of announcing to the universe that I was a Tennan, and that the Galaxy Police was just a part of the bigger picture."

"Your father was a hard man, wasn't he?" Kiyone observed. "He really expected a lot from you."

"No. He just wanted me out of his way and he hoped that I might die a heroic death in some outpost somewhere." Seiryo said frankly, turning his attention back to his work. "He was disappointed. I turned out better at the job than he imagined I would. And I was determined to go all the way because he had no faith in me. So I did. He didn't expect me to come back. It was a shock to him, when I did."

"Enough of a shock to kill him?" Kiyone frowned, and Seiryo's eyes narrowed.

"My father's death was an accident." He said levelly. "And the Emperor has closed the case. I am not going to discuss it with you, Detective. I was under the impression you knew it was not at my hand, so don't try and interrogate me on the sly. I know what you're doing, you know. It's not so easy to fool someone who's had the same training as you."

"Oh." Kiyone pinkened, shaking her head. "No, I didn't mean that… I mean, I suppose I did, but I asked without thinking about it. I guess I just don't like a question without answers… it's sort of instinctive to

find those answers and put everything in it's proper place."

She sighed.

"For the record, I don't think you killed your father." She added. "I think you know something about who did and how, but I didn't mean to push the issue. It's a bad habit of mine."

"Not in your line of work." Seiryo shook his head, keying in a row of digits and then pressing the enter key. "But I'd prefer it if my family life stayed away from your microscope. I told you Father's death was an accident and that's the entire truth. You have your answer, so the matter can be laid to rest."

Kiyone tilted her head on one side as she considered this, but obediently dropped it, watching instead as the screen filled up with the coded digits of Agent Kuramitsu's sealed Elite file.

"How long will Unko take to decode it?" She asked instead. Seiryo shrugged.

"It should be more or less instantaneous, once I've told it what to use." He replied. "It's a top of the line program… it shouldn't take too long. As I said, if I'd had access to the ship before, I would have already unlocked the file."

"Well, you have access now." Washu put in, folding her arms across her chest as she glanced from one to the other. "You see? I knew you two could play nicely together, if you tried."

"Washu." Kiyone rolled her eyes, and Washu laughed.

"Well?" She demanded. "At least we're making progress now."

"Indeed we are." Seiryo sat back in his seat, and from his tone of voice Kiyone could tell he was pleased. "I think we're in."

"It still looks like Greek to me." Kiyone squinted at the monitor. "I thought Unko was going to decode it?"

"It has. That's in Old Era Juraian." Washu said thoughtfully. Seiryo nodded his head.

"As I thought it would be… it's nice when a hunch pans out." He observed absently. "I suppose it's no surprise that you're fluent in Jurai's ancient language, Lady Washu. Give me a second, and I'll convert the dialect to Galactic Tongue."

He keyed in a few more digits, and finally the text on the screen made sense to Kiyone's frustrated eyes.

“At last!” She exclaimed. “So what do we have?”

“Well, the file was definitely sealed by Agent Kuramitsu.” Seiryo said decidedly. “There’s his name, right there. And beyond that…”

“Interesting.” Washu’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Kuroda, huh? I never heard that name before. Is it familiar to you, Seiryo-sama?”

“No, it isn’t, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything.” Seiryo admitted. “I didn’t pay a lot of attention to people I didn’t have to. There are a lot of people at Jurai’s court, after all.”

“But not that many of them are sentenced to death for high treason.” Kiyone said softly. “Kuroda, Yukari. Convicted of demonic practices and sentenced to a high level Juraian execution. What does that mean, someone? High level? What is that?”

“Our delightful judicial system has a whole range of archaic ways of dealing with convicts.” Seiryo said dryly. “Death is only usually used in cases of treason these days, because there are too many conscientious objectors. In such cases, the level of treason committed is taken into account and the nature of the criminal is also considered. A low level conviction might involve death by sleeping poison, for example.”

“And a high level conviction?”

“Well, she was convicted of demonic practices. On this planet full of magics, gods and ghosts, that’s about as high treason as you can get.” Seiryo pursed his lips. “She was probably sent into Jurai’s sun.”

“*What*?” Horror flooded Kiyone’s eyes. “But… but that’s… that’s completely barbaric!”

“Perhaps.” Seiryo nodded his head. “But still, it’s the most extreme form of Juraian execution still in use. It’s used very, very rarely. But in this case, I think they wanted to be certain that there would be no chance of survival or return. Traditionally, belief in demons has been rife on this planet.”

He sent Washu a rueful grimace, then,

“They were probably antagonised by their experiences on worlds such as Kihaku.”

“Probably.” Washu agreed. “They certainly were extremely suspicious of the Kii and of Kii practices. And Tokimi’s escapades didn’t do anything to breach that divide.”

“Quite.” Seiryo nodded. “In Juraian tradition, demons are not living

entities like you or I. They are monstrosities created from the darkness, capable of re-creating themselves if even a tiny piece of them is left. In those circumstances, to eliminate them, they must be completely destroyed. Jurai's sun is the only place where such a fate is assured. Nothing could survive there — not even a demon with the most vile powers. Such is the archaic belief which still upholds our judicial system."

"So they sent her into the sun?" Kiyone murmured. Seiryo nodded.

"Sealed in a capsule." He agreed. "Alive or dead, I couldn't tell you. Such things don't appear in public reports… if the wider universe knew that Jurai sanctioned such a barbaric form of execution, there would probably be an outcry. But on the very rarest of occasions, superstition overtakes rational common sense and belief in witchcraft and demons wins through. Now you understand better why I am so sceptical of all things spiritual. To my mind, a lot of the crazier ideas are associated with old, backwards practices we could well do with losing."

"I still think it's inhuman. Whatever she did." Kiyone shivered. "It's a horrible way to do it."

"Does it say anything more about what she did… or just demonic practices?" Washu asked. Seiryo shrugged his shoulders.

"No more than that." He responded. "The file isn't really pertaining to that case at all. Agent Kuramitsu has gone into more detail about the woman's daughter — a young girl by the name of Yugi… for some reason, that does ring a bell with me. Yugi Kuroda… for the life of me, I can't remember why."

"So the child was orphaned by Jurai's government?" Kiyone asked softly. Washu nodded.

"Looks that way." She agreed. "She was just a girl of Sasami's age, when it all happened. But if you read Kuramitsu-san's account, it doesn't look like she was the innocent victim of judicial paranoia. 'Corruption and possession'…that doesn't sound like your average little girl to me."

"Yugi Kuroda was confined indefinitely for a multitude of crimes, including collusion with her mother's dark acts and the corruption and possession of a member of Jurai's Royal household." Kiyone read aloud. "Confined?"

"I suppose even Jurai balked at the idea of firing a child into the sun." Seiryo ruminated. "I expect she was exiled somewhere remote,

where noone would ever be able to break the seal on her prison."

"But seals are made to be broken, whether on purpose or by accident." Washu said slowly. "I was confined on the Earth for seven of their centuries, and the idea was that I would never be set free. But Ryoko and Ayeka decided to have a fight in my cave, and they accidentally set me loose."

"You think that's what's happened here?" Kiyone looked anxious. "That something has broken the seal on Yugi Kuroda's prison and she's come back… looking for revenge?"

"For the death of her mother, almost certainly." Washu nodded grimly. "But they had an agenda before this even began. Before Kuramitsu-san and his companions took action against them. It's not too much of a stretch to assume that if she really has been released from her cage, she's trying to set in motion once more the plan from years ago. Is there a date on this file, Seiryo-sama? Do we know when Yugi was confined?"

"Let me see." Seiryo scrolled down the screen, pausing the cursor at the end of a paragraph. "Here we are. In the penultimate year of the Emperor Shigure IV. He capped his reign off with a flourishing finale, by the looks of it. Perhaps we should be relieved that Kain distracted his attention after that. Shigure-sama was a bold, frightening man who didn't take no for an answer easily. Who knows where it might have ended? Bad enough that he sanctioned executing a woman in a controversial manner and locking her child up somewhere in the wilds of space."

"No!" Kiyone leapt up, realisation dawning in her blue eyes. "*Not* in the wilds of space! In the solar system where that Seniwan ship was — the Tsubasa was guarding Yugi Kuroda's prison! She must have been sleeping there for years!"

"Until something woke her up." Seiryo frowned. Kiyone nodded.

"And what did it is pretty obvious, too, when you think about it." She responded. "Everything in that solar system has been constant for generations. Except for *one* thing. Six months ago, one of the planets ceased to exist. And debris from exploding planets…"

"Could easily have collided with the containment unit, breaking her free." Washu paled. "Then this is partly my fault… when Sasami and I went to free Tenchi and Mihoshi, I never dreamed…"

"I don't think that you can take the blame for it, Washu." Kiyone shook her head. "As you said, something would have broken the seal

eventually. It might not have been Kihaku — but it seems too much of a coincidence to me that this happens so soon after your planet was destroyed. She must have been biding her time, regaining her strength until she had some way to leave the cell and return to the mainstream world. First the Seniwan ship, who radioed us for help. Then Yagami, to get to a busy hub like Headquarters. And from there…"

"The Sumire, in order to get to Jurai." Seiryo let out a low whistle. "Detective Makibi, I think you may have just hit the nail on the head."

"All those people were killed because they might have been potential witnesses, and she's learnt that talk is dangerous." Kiyone continued. "She'd have known that an agent of the Galaxy Police was involved in killing her mother and sealing her away, so she took no chances in leaving anyone behind. That's why she killed the crew of the Tsubasa, so they couldn't tell us anything about her or what they were protecting. And it's why she killed the agents who transported me and the ones on board the Sumire. It meant, of course, she had to kill *all* of the people on board the Sumire, just to be sure noone could possibly report back about her. She couldn't know whether the same man was still at Headquarters — her concept of time must have been shaken badly by the long confinement. She couldn't take the risk. It's never had anything to do with Kanemitsu or Seniwa at all. It's to do with the Galaxy Police Elite and Jurai."

"That does make sense." Washu acknowledged. "Time does seem to run backwards when you're imprisoned like that. She wouldn't have been aware of Kuramitsu-san's retirement or the fact that the contents of her file were sealed away from most people at the Galaxy Police. I think what we reasoned out regarding you, Kiyone, is also correct. She knows you duplicated files from the Tsubasa but didn't realise the importance of them until later. So now she's biding her time, hoping to find them and destroy them and while you're her only link to them, she's hoping you'll reveal something to her. That's why of all people, she hasn't launched an attack on you as such."

"And the Kumashiro girl? How did she survive all of this, in the midst of so much death?" Seiryo asked. Kiyone shrugged.

"I haven't reasoned that much yet." She admitted. "Perhaps she did hide, or perhaps Yugi was able to erase her memories so that she wouldn't know anything about what went on. She's just a child, after all. She wouldn't have provided much resistance. Who knows? Maybe some part of her took pity on Sakuya and spared her life because she was a child herself when she was orphaned and sent away from home."

“Some way to do it.” Washu snorted. “Since this Yugi seems likely to be the one who killed the Kumashiro child’s poor father. But I suppose it is possible she did hide… and was somehow overlooked when Yugi was on the rampage. I don’t know how to tie that together, either… since we know that Sakuya and her father travelled from Kanemitsu together, and your reasoning eliminates Kanemitsu from this entirely. Those men were just in the wrong place at the wrong time… that’s all.”

“Yes.” Kiyone nodded. “Precisely.”

“I’m trying to think back to before I left Jurai… but so much has happened since then, and my brain isn’t in the best shape it’s ever been.” Seiryo rubbed his temples. “I do vaguely remember a Yugi at court… but nothing more. In any case, she would probably have been younger than me by some years. I believe that might have been the same year my father and I fell out, and I was sent to join the Police Academy. Certainly it was around that time — and either way, I’m not drawing any results.”

“Well, there are other lines of enquiry.” Washu pointed out. “If this execution was so unusual, people must remember it.”

“But we can’t exactly tackle the royal family and ask them which of them got possessed years ago.” Kiyone pointed out. “Now we know what we’re dealing with, we can’t go to the Emperor at all. Since he was Crown Prince when this happened, he must have been involved in this then and he might take exception to us digging up the past in the way we have. Washu, it wouldn’t affect you — he’s scared of you and we all know it. But Tennan-san and I have things to lose. Azusa-heika has influence at Headquarters and I might lose my position forever. And Tennan-san…”

“I’m already on tentative ground with Jurai’s administrative powers that be.” Seiryo agreed. “Detective Makibi is right. It’s too big a risk.”

“You’re forgetting one other person who would have been here around the same time, though.” Washu objected.

“We are?” Kiyone frowned. “Who?”

Washu smiled, spreading her hands.

“My daughter.” She said simply. “Ryoko, of course. She was here on Jurai as a ward of Azusa until she was about twelve or thirteen. I know when she was born, so by a process of elimination, she must have been on Jurai when all of this went on. She and Ayeka would have been no more than eleven at the time, I’m sure. She’s our next

focus. We'll ask Ryoko what she remembers about Yugi Kuroda and her mother. Maybe she'll recall something that can help us."

"That's a thought." Kiyone's expression cleared and she nodded her head. "All right. Then I'll go and see if I can track Ryoko down. If I do, I'll bring her back here as soon as I can — if she can shed any light on this we might be able to work out where this Yugi girl is hiding and how to bring her down before she hurts anyone else."

As Kiyone hurried across the palace grounds, she paused for a moment to glance up at the clear sky. A frown touched her expression as she shook her head in irritation, quickening her pace towards the main conclave.

"Doesn't it drive anyone else mad that it never rains on this wretched planet?" She muttered. "Always clear, always cloudless, always blue. What are they trying to say — that nothing ever goes wrong on Jurai? I'm sick of secrecy and cover-ups. If they'd thought to tell people about this girl before, then maybe all of this would already have been resolved. So many people dying and because of what? Because Juraian administration is so afraid of public outcry? And what about sending people into the sun? How can a planet as progressive as Jurai claims to be do something so horrible… even to a convicted criminal? Ayeka and Sasami, you might be my friends, but your world has a lot of issues and that's for sure."

As she stepped through the archway that led to the conclave itself, she caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye and she paused, turning to see what it was. Although her panic impulses had begun to calm since she had started focusing on the greater need of her case, somehow the presence of someone else within the silent conclave set her nerves on edge.

"Ryoko?" She called. "Are you here? I need to talk to you — if that's you, come out and stop trying to scare me!"

There was no response, and Kiyone's frown deepened.

"That's stupid. Why would Ryoko be hanging around the Royal Conclave, anyway?" She muttered. "I'm still far too easily spooked. Get a grip, Kiyone. If you can handle spending time in a room with *that man*, you can handle this. Whoever it is is probably bent on their own business anyway. They don't care about you and you shouldn't bother about them, either. You're just a Detective with the Galaxy Police — friend of the Princess you might be, but most of the court probably don't even know your name."

She turned on her heel, preparing to head back the way she had come, but as she reached a fork in the path, she caught sight of the figure again. She frowned, her eyes narrowing as she took in the dark-clad form, pursing her lips as she considered what kind of errand involved being thickly swathed in black fabric on a sunny day such as today.

“Strange.” She decided. “Or someone up to no good? Well, Kiyone, you’re a Galaxy Police Detective. Discharged or not, if something amiss is going on, it’s up to you to get to the bottom of it. Ryoko can wait — like as not she’ll be somewhere in the palace itself and I should be able to find her without a problem. Right now, this looks more interesting — perhaps it will prove to be a clue.”

She slowed her pace, slipping her hands into her pockets as she sauntered nonchalantly down the stone-coated path, all the while keeping her eye on the dark figure ahead of her. The other person seemed unaware that they had company, for they did not falter in their progress, and as Kiyone observed, she realised that their was something strange and unfamiliar about their gait.

“Almost as if they were gliding, not walking.” She reflected. “But no, I see feet on the ground, so they’re not flying. I don’t think I’ve seen anyone move quite like that before.”

So intent was she on her spying, she did not see that a stone was loose from the road ahead and she tripped, almost falling headlong. She muttered a curse at the noise her clumsiness must have created, but the figure did not even turn to see what was behind them, and Kiyone frowned, tilting her head on one side as she tried to work out whether the other person had even registered she was there.

“Hard of hearing? Completely deaf?” She wondered. ‘Or just playing a game with me — waiting to see if I’m fool enough to be lulled into a false sense of… hang on a minute!’ As the figure made a sharp turn off the long pathway. “That’s the *Tennan* estate!”

The stranger did not falter at Kiyone’s exclamation, walking purposefully and calmly across the main forecourt of the Tennan family manor. Now certain something was amiss, Kiyone threw caution to the wind, quickening her pace as she sought to close the gap between her and her companion. As she reached the entrance of the Tennan grounds, she saw the figure place a hand on the door of the manor house, and even from that distance Kiyone was aware of the screeching click of a lock being forced back. The door swung cleanly open, and the dark-clad shape glided inside.

Kiyone bit her lip, hurrying up the steps of the estate and pausing briefly to glance at the door latch as she reached the entrance. The lock had been opened from the outside without a key, and yet neither the wood or the metal lock showed any sign of damage. Despite herself, a cold chill began to stir in Kiyone's heart. For a brief moment she felt an overwhelming desire to turn around and run far from this place and its strange visitors.

"If Seiryo Tennan proves to be involved in any of this, I swear…" She muttered, closing her eyes as she fought to get a grip on her rising sense of panic. Images of the attack aboard Yagami danced and teased across her senses, but she steeled herself, forcing them back as she stepped determinedly through the doorway and into the spacious hall. The door of the solar was ajar, and out of the corner of her eye Kiyone caught sight of a glittering metal poker, hung carefully beside the fireplace from an ornate silver hook. In an instant, Kiyone made up her mind, darting into the solar and retrieving the long, thin device. She glanced down at it, her grip tightening as she forged forwards, just catching sight of the edge of a flapping cape disappearing around the top of the stairwell.

"It's not my weapon of choice, but at least I'm prepared now." She told herself, taking the stairs two at a time as she remembered that not only did Seiryo's frail mother sleep in the upper echelons of the house, but also the vulnerable, unsuspecting Tokimi. "Maybe I've been too quick to be suspicious of Tennan-san. He's not here — he's with Washu. And maybe someone is taking advantage of that fact. It could be the Emperor, sending someone to find out information — in which case, they're protected enough not to care that I'm on their tail. Or…"

Another chill washed through her and she shook her head firmly.

"No, I'm not going to think about this." She told herself fiercely. "I'm just going to get to the bottom of it, like a good Detective does. I am *not* losing my edge, and I'm going to prove it. So what if I don't have my blaster or my stun gun with me? So what if I don't have my badge or my spaceship? This is still my job and I'm still sworn to protect innocent people. And I'm going to do that, damn it, whatever it takes!"

As she finished her pep talk, she reached the top of the stairs, and a brief feeling of helplessness washed through her as she registered the length of the corridor she had stumbled into. The previous night, accompanying Seiryo and Tokimi, it had not seemed to be such a huge house, as Seiryo had known exactly where he was going. But now, on her own and in the daylight, Kiyone hesitated. This was the same floor

that they had come to the previous evening, of that she was sure. But there were so many rooms… how was she to find her mysterious attacker?

A sudden shriek from along the hall made up her mind for her and she darted forwards towards the source of the noise, placing her hands against the door as another blood-curdling shriek emitted from inside. As she forced the door to open, Kiyone recognised the cry as Tokimi's, and she burst into the room, poker wielded in readiness for whatever she was to find.

The dark figure stood over the bed, hands flickering with a white light as they advanced on a clearly terrified Tokimi, and Kiyone felt a burst of rage and adrenalin rush through her as she took in the alarm in the former Priestess's big blue eyes. Tokimi was huddled back against the carved head of the bed, and in comparison her would-be assailant seemed to tower over her, giving Kiyone the impression that she was dealing with someone both tall and powerful. She swallowed hard, uttering an inward prayer for strength. Then she leapt forward.

"Galaxy Police!" She exclaimed, surprised at how commanding her voice sounded despite the panic that sought to surge within. "Stop right there!"

The hooded figure turned, the thick, dark fabric hanging over their face in such a way that for a moment Kiyone believed the being had no head. She bit back the urge to scream, gripping her poker more tightly as her opponant moved slowly towards her, raising glittering hands towards her. The figure moved in eerie, methodical silence, and only the sound of Tokimi's frightened sobs punctuated the atmosphere. For a moment Kiyone froze, her mind flitting unbidden back to Seiryo's assault on her aboard Yagami. Then Tokimi let out a blood-curdling shriek for help and it jerked the detective back to where she was. Gritting her teeth, she tightened her grasp on the poker once again, bringing it down decisively across the side of her opponant's skull.

The white light flickered and died from the figure's hands and the caped assailant toppled forwards, dropping like a stone to the floor of the chamber. As she fell, the hood of her cloak dropped back, and Kiyone saw for the first time who she had brought down. Colour drained from her face as she shook her head, taking a step away from the fallen form.

"*Ayeka!*" She exclaimed.

Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

"Tokimi? Tokimi, what on earth is the matter?"

As Kiyone stared speechlessly down at the fallen form of Jurai's Crown Princess, the door of the bedchamber swung open to reveal Suki, the anxiety in her aqua eyes growing as she registered the scene before her. She let out an exclamation, staring at Kiyone in abject shock.

"Detective? And… Princess *Ayeka*? Oh… oh… what have you… what…"

She faltered, her face chalk white, and somehow Suki's hesitancy and fright brought Kiyone's racing senses once more under her control. Tossing the poker to the floor, she crouched at Ayeka's side, relieved to see that the Princess's chest rose and fell gently as she breathed, and that her judgement had been exactly on the mark. Through the thick cloth of the hood, Kiyone's aim had been perfect, and although a faint bruise was already beginning to show itself on the Princess's brow, her pulse-rate seemed normal.

"She's alive, Suki-sama. Don't look at me like that." The detective said finally, raising her head to meet Suki's terrified gaze. "I'm a Detective — I'm trained to stun, not kill. Is Tokimi all right?"

"Tokimi…?" Suki faltered, turning to glance towards the bed, and Tokimi held out her hands to her friend, a frightened look in her blue eyes.

"Suki, the demon was here." She sobbed. "The demon was coming… it was coming to get Tokimi!"

"There's no demon, Tokimi." Suki sat down on the bed, sliding a comforting arm around the distraught girl. "Noone wants to hurt you."

"But they did." Kiyone said grimly, putting a gentle hand to Ayeka's brow. "I followed Ayeka here, Suki-sama, and she definitely meant Tokimi harm."

"But… why would Princess Ayeka want to hurt Tokimi?" Suki demanded. "And why are *you* here, Detective? Where is my brother? Why hasn't he come back from session yet — what's going on?"

“Shh…” Kiyone held up her hands, as Ayeka’s eyelashes fluttered and lifted to reveal bewildered ruby eyes. “Not now. Right now I think Ayeka needs some help.”

“Kiyone?” Ayeka murmured the words faintly, reaching out a hesitant hand to her friend and gently Kiyone raised her companion into a sitting position. “Now where am I? What’s going on?”

“You’re in the Tennan house, and I just followed you here.” Kiyone said quietly. “Ayeka, why did you come to hurt Tokimi? Did the Emperor send you to do something to her? Has it really got to that point, that you think she’s guilty of all these things?”

“Hurt… Tokimi?” Ayeka repeated blankly. Then she groaned, raising a hand to her head. “I don’t remember. What did you *do* to me?”

“I didn’t have much time to think about it. You weren’t really in a mood to be reasoned with.” Kiyone looked grim. “I laid you out… you’ll have a bruise. Good thing for you that I’m trained to do that without causing permanent damage. I really thought you might kill either Tokimi or I if I didn’t act, so if you have a headache, I’m sorry. And now I want to know what’s going on. As your friend, Ayeka, I want you to tell me the truth. Is this some covert scheme of Azusa-sama’s?”

“Scheme?” Ayeka swallowed hard, then she shook her head. “No… no, Uncle is determined not to do anything to Tokimi or Lord Tennan. He says there’s no proof.”

“Then why were you here?”

“I… I don’t know.” Ayeka raised tearful eyes to her companion, and somehow Kiyone knew the Princess was telling the truth. “I’m scared of myself, Kiyone. I keep… I keep wanting to hurt people, but I don’t remember doing it. I just… I wake up… and I can’t remember…”

She faltered, and Kiyone sighed, getting to her feet as she gently helped the Princess to hers.

“I believe you.” She said frankly. “But I swear, Ayeka, you were going to hurt Tokimi.”

“Tokimi?” Ayeka turned her gaze towards the former Priestess, who offered her a smile, holding out her hands.

“Friends?” She asked. “Are you a friend of Nii-chan and Suki?”

Ayeka just stared at her, and Suki sighed, shaking her head.

“This whole thing is getting too much for me.” She said sadly. “Detective, if Ayeka-sama did try to hurt Tokimi — why isn’t Tokimi scared of her? And why doesn’t Ayeka-sama remember it?”

“I’m not making it up.” Kiyone said hotly. “Tokimi was under attack and I intervened. That’s the truth.”

“Tokimi was attacked by a demon.” Tokimi’s eyes became big at this. “She came to hurt me… to take me away.”

“Is the demon here now, Tokimi-chan?” Suki asked gently. “Or has she gone away?”

“She’s not here.” Tokimi shook her head. “Kiyone-san chased her away.”

“Chased her…” Kiyone faltered, then her eyes opened wide as a sudden realisation hit her. She grabbed the Princess by the shoulders, wheeling her around so that she could meet the other girl’s gaze head on.

“Ayeka, you don’t remember what happened here today.” She said eagerly. “That’s true, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I told you that.” Ayeka agreed, sinking down on the end of Tokimi’s bed. “And I don’t care if you did just stun me, Kiyone — did you have to give me quite such a headache? I’m really not sure what’s going on.”

“Well, I might be.” Kiyone’s eyes sparkled with triumph. “Tokimi’s demon has gone… but that doesn’t mean that she wasn’t here, or that Ayeka wasn’t here to hurt Tokimi in the first instance.”

“You’re not making sense, Detective.” Suki frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Your brother has managed to open that file we discussed last night, Lady Suki.” Kiyone said quietly. “And I think I’ve just figured out how things are slotting together. Ayeka, tell me something. Do you remember a girl called Yugi Kuroda?”

“Yugi… Kuroda?” Ayeka blinked, then shook her head. “No. The name doesn’t mean anything to me.”

Well, that’s a shame. “Kiyone pursed her lips.” Because we discovered that when you and Ryoko and Sasami were a lot younger, there was a girl on this planet by that name. She and her mother both, in fact. The girl was exiled for taking psychic control of a member of the royal family, and causing chaos as a result. Of what nature, we’re not sure. But we’re pretty sure — Tennan-san, Washu and I — that

this Kuroda girl is the killer that slaughtered the people on the Sumire and now, having seen you here today, I think she's found herself a new project. Tokimi saw a demon today because Yugi had control of you while you were trying to hurt her. Now Yugi's hold has been broken, Tokimi doesn't see the demon in you any more. She's Kii so she sees through to people's souls. And if Yugi's soul was controlling you, then Tokimi would have seen only Yugi. Not Ayeka."

"None of that made even the slightest bit of sense to me." Ayeka buried her head in her hands. "Kiyone, speak more clearly. How do you know so much about the Sumire? What is this file — this Yugi Kuroda? And I thought you hated Lord Tennan — now you're *working* with him?"

"Sometimes it's better to know your enemies and keep them close." Kiyone said frankly. "Besides, he's proven helpful so far, and he and I have the same goal. We both want to get to the bottom of what happened on the Sumire, because we both feel other people are in danger. And if we're right and this Kuroda girl is behind it, then the danger is far closer to home than it seems. If she can randomly pick people and use them as her puppets to do her bidding, no wonder there's no evidence at any of the scenes. She's manipulating things from a distance."

"I don't like any of this." Suki said apprehensively. "I don't like that you've brought Seiryo into it, Detective. I don't want him in more trouble with the throne, and now Lady Ayeka is involved…"

She hesitated, shaking her head.

"His guilt over what he did to you on Yagami will drive him to do whatever it takes to placate his conscience." She added. "I'm not sure he's thinking clearly and I don't want anything to happen to him."

Kiyone stared at her for a moment, then shook her head.

"Seiryo-san isn't the one in danger, but Tokimi clearly is." She said quietly. "Last night, Tokimi saw something at the court function and now Yugi wants to shut her up. She thought she'd use Ayeka since Ayeka is beyond suspicion and noone would question where she goes and what she does. Which means that whether she likes it or not, Ayeka is now involved. I think we need to speak to Washu. She needs to know about this as soon as possible."

"I still don't know what you're talking about, Kiyone." Ayeka objected plaintively, but Kiyone paid the Princess no attention, so wrapped up was she in mapping out her deductions into a coherent plan. She dropped down beside Tokimi, taking her by the hand.

“Tokimi, the demon you saw today, was it the same demon you saw last night?” She asked softly. Tokimi looked alarmed, and Suki frowned.

“Don’t scare her.” She said reproachfully. “Poor Tokimi has been through enough already, Kiyone-san. Please.”

“I need her help.” Kiyone said, shaking her head. “Please, Tokimi. Your friends might be in danger, and so might you. Will you tell me about the demon?”

Tokimi’s lip trembled, and she glanced up at Suki, as if looking for reassurance. Suki sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“If you think there’s anything you can tell Kiyone-san, Tokimi, then you should tell her.” She said resignedly.

“Demon… kill… goddess.” Tokimi whispered, then she turned, burying her head once more in Suki’s shoulder. Kiyone sighed, getting to her feet.

“I know she’s hurt, but I wish she was a bit more lucid.” She said with a groan. “Maybe I’m just the wrong person to be asking her these kinds of things. She barely knows me, after all.”

She frowned, assessing her options. Then she placed a hand on Ayeka’s shoulder.

“Ayeka, will you come with me now to see Washu?” She asked. “I need to find Ryoko, too. If Tokimi can’t tell us anything, then you and she are going to have to do… because this has stepped up a gear now and if it’s as bad as I think it is, I want to resolve it before anyone else gets hurt.”

“Well, this is a cosy gathering.”

Ryoko dropped down into an empty seat, glancing around the cluttered chamber at her companions as she did so. “My mad mother, a discharged detective, a Crown Princess, a space pirate and a Lord of Jurai who thinks it’s fun to bend the rules on occasion. What exactly are you after, Washu? Kiyone said you needed my help — but I haven’t a clue what this is in aid of.”

“I didn’t expect to see Ayeka here.” Washu frowned, a troubled expression flitting across her green eyes as she folded her arms across her chest. “Involving the royal house of Jurai was not in the plan, Kiyone… did something happen that I don’t know about? I only sent you to find Ryoko… not Ayeka as well.”

“I stumbled onto Ayeka on my way to find Ryoko.” Kiyone explained, taking a seat herself and making herself more comfortable. “She was at your house, Tennan-san. Trying her best to silence Tokimi once and for all.”

“Tokimi?” Washu’s eyes opened wide with alarm at this, and Ryoko pursed her lips, casting the discomfitted princess a sidelong glance.

“I don’t suppose that this is another case of your random sleepwalking, is it, Princess?” She asked quietly.

“What do you mean, *another* case?” Kiyone was on this in a flash. “Ryoko, you know something about this already?”

“It seems that we all know bits and pieces and it’s time those bits and pieces were put together.” Seiryo said grimly. “Kiyone-san, is Tokimi all right? And my sister and my mother?”

“They’re fine.” Kiyone inclined her head. “Suki wasn’t too happy to find Ayeka knocked out on her carpet, but aside from that, noone was hurt. Tokimi was frightened, but that’s to be expected.”

“So, this sleepwalking.” Washu’s eyes narrowed, as she fixed her gaze on the Princess thoughtfully. “What exactly do you mean, Ryoko?”

Ryoko gestured to the scratch marks on her throat, offering her mother a rueful grimace.

“I encountered Ayeka last night and she wasn’t in a talking mood.” She said quietly, and Ayeka buried her head in her hands at the reminder of her previous night’s activities. “She came at me in the darkness and did her very best to put an end to me. Except I’m a better fighter than that, so it didn’t go entirely according to plan. When I had her pinned down, she seemed to wake up — like she was coming out of a trance. She said she’d been sleepwalking — that in her dream she’d encountered a monster and she’d had to fight it. But instead, she was actually fighting me. And I understood it wasn’t the first time recently that this had happened.”

“I see.” Washu pursed her lips. “Ayeka? Is Ryoko right?”

“Yes.” Ayeka admitted reluctantly, raising tragic ruby eyes to the scientist’s penetrating green ones. “I’m sorry, Washu. I don’t know how I got to the Tennan estate, or why. I don’t remember leaving the court… but I must have done, because I was there.”

“So this has happened how many times now? Two? Or wait, if Ryoko’s wasn’t the first incident, maybe three?” Kiyone wondered.

Ayeka shrugged her shoulders.

“I don’t know.” She owned, a helpless note in her tone. “But I am only aware of three occasions.”

“Who was the potential victim on the first occasion, Lady Ayeka?” Seiryo asked quietly, and Ayeka bit her lip.

“Tsunami’s tree.” She whispered. “I thought Sasami was trapped in her branches, and I… I took a blade to her trunk. But she woke me up — her magic broke through and stopped me from going any further.”

“Tsunami.” Washu looked grave. “Lord Tennan, I believe you are right. We *do* all know bits and pieces.”

“Kiyone said something about a girl called Yugi Kuroda.” Ayeka remembered. “But the name doesn’t mean anything to me at all. And she said something about a file — a case… I don’t know. Something to do with Tokimi and the Sumire and… and these poor people who were killed aboard it?”

“In the briefest summary of things, the Sumire is only a part of the whole picture.” Washu said frankly, getting to her feet and flicking her hand at the big screen that overhung them, bringing it immediately to life. “Before Kiyone arrived here on Jurai, she and Mihoshi encountered a similar incident on a Seniwan ship, somewhere in the vicinity of Kihaku’s old position. From this ship, as is routine on an investigation, she duplicated the ship’s data drive information with a hope to use it for solving the case. Only it wound up a lot bigger than she imagined. The file seems to be the only reason this creature hasn’t killed Kiyone yet — but now that things are moving so quickly, it could mean that things change. The case file includes information about a girl called Yugi Kuroda and her mother Yukari. Ayeka, Ryoko, I need to know if either of you remember anything at all regarding those names.”

“I already said I didn’t.” Ayeka shook her head impatiently, but Ryoko frowned.

“Yukari Kuroda? Are you kidding — how could you forget that?” She demanded. “The woman was fired into the sun, wasn’t she? Sent into space as a demon — it was the first time that had been done in over a century. The whole planet turned out to see the final proceedings.”

“I don’t remember anything like that!” Ayeka looked blank. “Ryoko, you’re making it up! Jurai isn’t so barbaric as to fire someone into the sun!”

“On the contrary, Ayeka-hime, it’s a very rarely used form of Juraian punishment.” Seiryo said quietly, bowing his head towards his princess as he spoke. “It’s seldom used, but in very exceptional circumstances, it is considered the only way to guarantee a criminal is permanently disposed of. And Ryoko-san’s account seems to indicate that Yukari Kuroda was one of those cases.”

“I’ll say.” Ryoko nodded her head, pursing her lips as she remembered. “It sticks in my head because the old witch who was hired to watch me dragged me along for the spectacle. She told me that it was probably how I’d end up, since I was as much demon as the woman they were condemning. I didn’t sleep for weeks after that — I really believed what she said.”

“I guess in those circumstances, you would remember.” Kiyone said pensively. “Ryoko, that sucks.”

“Yes, it does, but it was a long time ago.” Ryoko nodded. “And the woman is very dead now. Burnt to a crisp, most likely.”

“What about Yugi Kuroda?” Washu asked. “Do you remember what happened to her?”

“I think she was sent away.” Ryoko frowned. “She wasn’t frizzled, I know that much. But I don’t know exactly what happened. I didn’t care all that much. She was a nasty little brat.”

“So you *did* know her.”

“As much as I knew anyone.” Ryoko snorted. “I was a foundling, and she was the child of some titled Juraian Lord. Her mother was a widow, I think, but she had huge estates from her husband’s death. I don’t think Lady Kuroda was from Jurai originally, but they always acted like they were this elite upper class family. They had a lot of money, so they could throw their weight around.”

“What do you remember about her, Ryoko?” Kiyone asked softly. “The girl herself. You said she was a brat — was she?”

“Yes.” Ryoko’s eyes narrowed. “Stuck up, snotty little madam. Actually, I’m pretty sure she was a close friend of Princess here, once upon a time. I’m amazed that you don’t remember her, Ayeka… I guess it has something to do with the selective memory Jurai’s court have when someone appears to have turned traitor.”

“Ryoko, that’s not fair.” Ayeka snapped. “I’m not that fickle — if that Yugi girl had really been a friend of mine, well, I’d remember her. No matter what her mother did.”

“Well, you did spend time with her. More than I did, in fact, and I can remember her.” Ryoko retorted. “She’s not the kind of person you easily forget, you know. Masses of golden hair, big aqua eyes, the kind of brat who looks like an angel but really, truly isn’t. Way too good to be true in her appearance. Her mother was just the same. Picture perfect fake people… I can’t believe you don’t remember her even a little bit.”

“Well, I don’t.” Ayeka folded her arms. “I’ve never heard the name before in my life.”

“Tokimi said that the demon had a yellow head.” Washu remembered, half to herself as she turned to glance up at the monitor behind her. “I wonder if that’s what she meant. Fair hair.”

“When did she say that?” Seiryo looked surprised.

“When I removed her from the Infirmary.” Washu responded. “It was part of a deal we made. She’d tell me, if I took her away from there. She was really scared by what she saw, and now I understand a little bit more about Yugi Kuroda, I think that I realise why. I haven’t had the misfortune to clap eyes on this demon myself — perhaps that’s a pity. But Tokimi’s not as discreet as she should be, and considering last night’s little fiasco, it’s clear she’s hitting too close to the truth somewhere along the line.”

“Poor Tokimi.” Seiryo mused. “She’s caught up in something she doesn’t understand, and idiots are blaming her for it when actually she might well be in danger herself.”

“No doubt she’s in danger, if this Yugi girl has already tried to make Ayeka kill her.” Washu said darkly.

“How do we know for sure that it is this Yugi person, though?” Ryoko demanded, as Ayeka flinched at Washu’s casual words. “I mean, it’s all very convenient and all, but there’s not a lot of proof. Just the ravings of a girl not really in her senses, and your theories. Nothing else.”

“I think the circumstantial evidence is enough to raise eyebrows, though. Even from a Galaxy Police perspective.” Kiyone said frankly. “As Washu said, whoever is behind all of these things has been on my tail but hasn’t tried to hurt me yet because I have something that it wants. The only thing I could possible have is this file, and this file concerns the Kuroda family. It might not be a smoking gun, but it’s fairly compelling evidence.”

“But we still don’t know where she is or how to find her.” Seiryo

said blackly. “And we need to do those things, instead of patting ourselves on the back for working out who’s responsible. If she’s capable of taking control of minds, then she’s even more dangerous than we first thought.”

“No… maybe not.” Washu shook her head thoughtfully. “She hasn’t been controlling minds, as such. She’s been operating through Ayeka… that’s quite different.”

“How, exactly?” Ayeka raised her gaze quizzically to the scientist’s. “Why is that any different? I didn’t ask anyone to come invade my brain, you know.”

“No, of course not.” Washu dismissed this with a flick of her hand. “But you are the one she’s targeted. I think that Ryoko is probably right, Ayeka. Yugi was a childhood friend of yours, even if so much has happened since that you’ve forgotten about her. And that maybe you had a bond before, too. The file we cracked open said something about possession and corruption of a member of Jurai’s royal family. It doesn’t give names, but what if she’s made a play for the same member this time around? Walking familiar ground, as it were?”

“You mean she’s used Ayeka to do things like this before?” Kiyone blanched, and Washu shrugged her shoulders.

“That’s my thought.” She agreed. “Look, it’s fairly clear to me that powerful magic has lasting effects. Seiryo-san, Kiyone, you both know that better than anyone. Seiryo-sama, you commented to me on your continued connection with Tokimi. The magic is gone, but the bond is not. Perhaps the same is true of Yugi and Ayeka. Yugi was taken away, and perhaps that’s why Ayeka doesn’t remember. But just like Tokimi doesn’t remember your prior connection, Lord Tennan, she still feels that it’s there. It would not be difficult for Yugi to make use of Ayeka in the same way as she did before. And Ayeka is a much more powerful individual now than she was then. I imagine Yugi believes Ayeka might be the one capable of accomplishing her final target.”

“Which is what?” Ayeka asked fearfully. “If you’re right, what does this mad woman want me to do?”

“From what Tokimi said, that seems pretty obvious.” Washu said grimly. “Like so many other foes before, Ayeka, she wants an end to Jurai’s protective power. Tsunami.”

“Sasami!” Ayeka paled, and Washu nodded her head.

“As you say.” She agreed. “So far, she hasn’t made her move. But

that she will seems almost a definite."

"I won't!" Ayeka said stubbornly. "I won't let her use me to hurt my own sister — I just won't! So she'll have to give up and leave me alone. I'm not some little girl and even if all the things you say are true, Washu, she's not going to find it so easy as that to take control of me again!"

"What confuses me still is why *Ryoko* was attacked." Kiyone reflected. "Tsunami's tree is Tsunami's tree, and clearly Tokimi saw something last night that upset her. But Ryoko, what did *you* do? Why did Ayeka launch an attack on you?"

Ayeka reddened, dropping her gaze, and Ryoko pursed her lips.

"Well, Yugi never did like me, when she was on Jurai before. Perhaps she decided to settle an old score… we did fight and argue, at times." She said slowly. "Although I did think, when it happened, that maybe Ayeka was jealous of the news I brought with me to Jurai."

"Why would Yugi Kuroda care about that?" Washu asked. Ryoko shrugged.

"I don't know, but *Ayeka* cares about it." She said frankly. "And it's possible Yugi used me as a test run."

"What news, exactly?" Kiyone demanded, and Ryoko sent her friend a slight smile.

"Tenchi and I are betrothed." She said simply. "That's all."

"Betr…" Kiyone gaped, and Ryoko grimaced at her.

"Thanks. That's a great reaction." She reproached her friend. "Yes."

"I've been under a lot of stress recently." Ayeka murmured, shooting Ryoko a dark look. "You didn't need to bring that up."

"I said I wouldn't tell Tenchi. Not that I wouldn't tell anyone else." Ryoko defended herself. "Besides, since you seem to be taking your amnesia trip on the road, it's probably important."

"I still don't think that Yugi would care whether Ryoko was getting married, or whether she was hanging from the light fittings." Washu said pensively. "There must be something else… you can't think of anything, musume-chan?"

"No, and don't call me that." Ryoko bristled. "That's the only thing I can think of that might have got Ayeka rattled."

"But it isn't Ayeka-sama, it's Yugi's motivation that's important."

Seiryo rubbed his temples. “This becomes ever more complicated by the minute. I am very afraid now for the safety of Tokimi and my family, even more so than I was before. Perhaps we should approach the Emperor after all. Maybe it’s time we brought the Imperial throne into this matter.”

“No… not yet.” Washu’s eyed narrowed. “But I do think that we need to have a word with Lord Haru. He’s Azusa’s Chief of Security, which means he must have trained under his predecessor. This did happen in the end years of Shigure IV, after all — the Emperor who ruled Jurai before Azusa. More importantly, Lord Haru is Ayeka’s father. If anyone knows anything about Yugi Kuroda, it will be him.”

“Getting information out of that old clam is like prying blood from a stone.” Ryoko muttered. “Do you think he’s going to want to talk about some brat that may have corrupted his eldest child years ago?”

“We’re going to find out.” Ayeka said firmly, getting to her feet and holding her hand out to the pirate. “You and I, Ryoko. We’re going to go and get to the bottom of this — after all, if you remember this girl, you can refute anything he says that isn’t true. And you’re one of the few people who has the nerve to face up to my father and do so.”

“That’s a good idea.” Washu agreed. “Meantime, Seiryo and I will go back to Tokimi and see if we can pry anything else out of her about this demon of hers. Kiyone, you’d better not come with us — she’s probably not quite as sure of you yet, so she might not be so happy to tell you.”

“Yeah, she did just see me hit someone with a poker, too.” Kiyone acknowledged. “All right. I’ll stay here. It’s probably safer, anyway, and I can keep going through the file — see if there’s anything else we’ve missed or overlooked.”

“Then it’s decided.” Washu looked satisfied. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

“Don’t you think that Jurai is beautiful?”

As they walked through the expansive palace grounds, Sasami sent her companion a curious look. It was the same afternoon, and having neatly managed to avoid the attentions of her serious-minded brother in law and her overworked uncle, Sasami had slipped out of the palace, locating her newest ally and coaxing her out for a walk in the greenery that surrounded the royal Tenju tree. Glancing at her now, Sasami could see that Sakuya’s complexion was still pale and peaky, and shadows beneath her eyes suggested she had not slept much after the previous night’s encounter, but the young princess had already resolved not to bring the matter up unless Sakuya did herself. A pang of sympathy flitted across the generous-natured girl’s young heart and she dimpled, flicking her hand in the direction of the stream that ran in a zig-zag through the land.

“Shall we walk to the water? The current’s up today, because of the wind, but it’s still pretty to see.”

“You’re still so nice to me.” Sakuya eyed Sasami with a pensive gaze, and Sasami frowned, nodding her head.

“Of course. We’re friends.” She replied. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I seem to be causing you all kinds of trouble.”

“How?”

“Last night. That girl… she was really angry.” Sakuya bit her lip. “She scared me. Didn’t she scare you?”

“Tokimi? No.” Sasami looked surprised. “Why would she? She was the one who was scared.”

“I thought she might hurt one of us.”

“Well, I don’t think she would.” Sasami shook her head decidedly. “She’s just a little confused still, that’s all. She had a horrible accident, you see, and her mind was damaged. She doesn’t think quite the same as she used to, and things scare her easily. You shouldn’t think about it, Sakuya-chan. It’s not important.”

“But what about what she said?” Sakuya asked curiously. “About killing Jurai’s Goddess. Didn’t that bother you at all? It would bother me.”

“No.” Sasami shook her head again. “Tsunami is strong. And besides, well, Tokimi didn’t mean it that way. She wasn’t threatening. She was just… just confused about something. That’s all. She doesn’t speak our language very well, especially when she’s upset. It’s part of the injury she has, and that’s all.”

“But *you’re* Tsunami. Aren’t you?”

“Huh?” Sasami stopped in her tracks, glancing at her companion in consternation. “What do you mean, Sakuya-chan? What did you say?”

Sakuya offered a faint smile, shrugging her shoulders.

“You’re Tsunami.” She repeated. “Isn’t that true?”

“Yes… sort of.” Sasami was taken aback. “But how did you know that? I thought it was a secret.”

“Lady Ayeka mentioned it, when she and Lord Takeru came to speak to me about the Sumire.” Sakuya’s aqua eyes became opaque. “That’s all. She thought that maybe the incident had something to do with Tsunami and she was quite persistant. She wanted to know what I remembered, and I guess this was why. She really cares about you.”

“Well, of course she does.” Sasami grinned. “She’s my sister. I love her and she loves me. Do you have any sisters or brothers?”

“No.” A thoughtful look flitted across Sakuya’s eyes at this. “No. Just Mother and me.”

“And your father, of course.”

“Father is dead.”

“Yes. Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Sakuya stretched her arms over her head, offering her friend a smile. “You wanted to walk further?”

“Just as far as the stream.” Sasami nodded. “It’s too racy to swim in on a windy day like this, but we can sit and watch the water for a while.”

“I don’t swim anyway.” Sakuya pulled a face. “I don’t like water very much.”

“You don’t?” Sasami looked startled. “Really?”

“Really.” Sakuya agreed. “I hate how it feels in my hair and on my skin… it makes me..feel tired and heavy and cold. It’s horrible.”

“I guess that must be a Kanemitsu thing.” Sasami dimpled. “But that’s okay. Like I said, no swimming today.”

“It’s big, for a stream.” Sakuya observed, as they reached the bank, Sasami squatting down at the edge and indicating for her friend to join her. “I’d say it’s more of a river. It’s so much bigger than I remember.”

“Than you… remember?” Sasami looked non-plussed. “Have you been to Jurai before, Sakuya-chan?”

“No. I meant from the window of the Infirmary.” Sakuya shook her head. “It looks like such a thin blue ribbon from up there, don’t you think? I didn’t realise it was so wide.”

“Well, it wasn’t always.” Sasami turned her gaze back to the racing water. “But you know, when it moves like this it pulls soil and earth in and then it gets wider. Only bit by bit, of course, but it adds up.”

She giggled.

“I guess it is more like a river, in a way.” She agreed. “But we still call it the stream. I like to come here a lot, Sakuya-chan. Especially when I want to think.”

“Or talk to Tsunami?” Sakuya asked softly. Sasami looked confused, and Sakuya gestured towards the water.

“You look like her. Your reflection.” She said simply. The Princess blushed, reaching a hand down into the water to disperse the floating image.

“Sometimes I do.” She agreed. “And yes, Tsunami does talk to me here. But you know, she talks to me wherever I am. She’s inside of me, so she doesn’t find it hard to reach me whenever she wants me.”

“Are you actually her? I mean, in the flesh?” Sakuya rested her chin on her hands, sprawling out on her stomach as she gazed up at her companion. Sasami tilted her head on one side.

“Ayeka really told you all about it, huh?” She remarked. “I suppose she really is worried about all of this — that somehow it might be a threat to me. Especially with what Tokimi said — I guess that makes sense.”

She shrugged her shoulders, edging closer to the water as she trailed her hand absently beneath the ripples.

“Tsunami says that I was always going to be her.” She said slowly. “So I suppose that I am Tsunami, really. I mean, that’s who I was when I was born. It was *why* I was born, and why I look the way I do. But… I don’t know, Sakuya. I’ve been Sasami for my whole life so even if the things I do and say and think are really a part of Tsunami, I like to think that I’m Sasami. And even when we are one person again, I’m still going to be Sasami. Because that’s who I am, you know? My family, my friends, they all know Sasami. So I’ll still be Sasami.”

She hesitated, sighing heavily.

“At least, I hope so.” She added pensively. “I don’t really know what will happen, when we do become one person. Tsunami promised she wouldn’t take over my life completely… but… it might change a lot of things. And I suppose it’s a bit strange to think of. So I don’t, if I can help it.”

“Are you scared to become her, then?” Sakuya asked curiously. Sasami shrugged.

“Maybe.” She admitted. “A little bit. I don’t want to stop being Sasami to be Tsunami. That’s all. I like being Sasami.”

“What if you never did have to become her, though?” Sakuya tilted her head on one side. “Don’t you get a choice?”

“I don’t think so.” Sasami sighed again. “Tsunami says we’re split from the same spirit, so that means eventually we’ll have to be one soul again. Trying to seperate us now would kill both of us, and obviously that wouldn’t be good for either one of us, would it?”

She grinned ruefully, shaking her head.

“I’m boring you with my babble.” She added. Sakuya shook her head.

“No. Not at all.” She assured her companion. “I like hearing all about Jurai, really.”

“Well, I’m grateful that you came out with me this morning, Sakuya-chan.” Sasami said wistfully. “Suki is busy with Tokimi and her mother — Lady Kaede is very sick and Suki often has to stay home and nurse her, when she’s having a bad day. Ayeka is working — Ayeka is always working. Tenchi and Ryoko are… well, I don’t know where they are, but probably doing something gross that couples do. I love them both but I don’t want to be a part of that. And we were meant to be looking after Kiyone for Ayeka, but she’s been holed up with Washu in her lab working on something she won’t tell me about.

I heard them talking about unlocking secrets and something from Headquarters… it sounded exciting. But apparently it's not any of my business… so if it wasn't for you, I'd be really lonely."

"I don't think I know Kiyone-san."

"She's a friend of ours from the Galaxy Police." Sasami said with a grin. "Only she's meant to be here on holiday. Thing is, she doesn't like taking holidays, and nor does Washu, if there's a mystery to crack. So I don't know what they're doing, but I wish they'd let me be involved. I feel left out."

"The Galaxy Police?" Sakuya's eyes narrowed. "There were Police officers on our ship, too. On the Sumire. They died."

"Yes…" Sasami bit her lip. "I'm sorry — everything must remind you, mustn't it?"

"I don't mind when you do it." Sakuya shrugged her shoulders, getting to her feet. She smiled, holding her hand out to her friend. "You're different from the others. You're special."

"I'm glad you think so." Sasami eyed the extended hand hesitantly. "But won't I hurt you?"

"No… no, it's all right." Sakuya assured her. "And we're friends. Aren't we?"

"We are." Sasami grinned, reaching out to take Sakuya's grip in hers. As she did so, a flood of images cascaded through her head and she let out an exclamation as some unseen force seemed to whip her legs from under her. She grabbed out with her free hand, but somehow Sakuya's fingers were slipping out of her grasp and she found herself falling backwards towards the racing waters of the stream.

With a screech she tumbled beneath the frozen waters, her head breaking the surface again almost immediately as she fought to swim for the shore. The current seemed to be increasing, however, and all around her the ripples lapped and teased at her skin, as if deliberately trying to hold her back. She drew a deep breath into her lungs, raising her gaze towards the shore.

"Sakuya-chan!" She screamed. "The current's so fast… help me!"

In a brief flash she caught sight of her friend, standing on the bank staring out towards her, but then the image was gone as the water whirled her around, twisting and disorientating her. Something seemed to wind itself around her legs, and she kicked out against it,

sure that some kind of river weed had got caught in the fastenings of her shoes. The more she kicked, however, the more something appeared to pull her down and it was with some difficulty that she fought against it, struggling to keep her head above the water.

“Sakuya-chan!” She yelled. “Get help! Get help!”

This time she could not see her friend on the bank, and as she was dragged beneath the surface a third time, panic surged through her young body.

“I can swim.” She told herself frantically. “So why can’t I get to the shore?”

As she battled to get her head above the water once more, she felt something flicker within her and with a sudden burst of energy, she broke free of whatever had been pulling her back, breaking the surface once more and taking in a deep, desperate gasp of air.

“Tsunami!” She whispered, almost breathless from the effort. “Tsunami, help me! I’m too tired — I can’t swim any more!”

“*Help is coming, Sasami-chan.*” The voice echoed in her thoughts, and somehow the strength of Tsunami’s heart beating around her own calmed Sasami’s rising sense of hysteria. She gritted her teeth, forging out for the bank once more. As she did so, she realised that she had been carried some way downstream and that the speed of the current had indeed dragged her almost to the edge of the palace grounds.

“Sakuya!” She murmured, as she set her sights for the bank and summoned the last of her strength, determined to keep herself above the crest of the water despite the cold that had begun to chill her right to the bone. “Where is Sakuya?”

“Lady Sasami!”

Before she could dwell on this question any further, there was the sound of another voice and tears of relief sprang into Sasami’s eyes as she recognised the speaker. There was a sudden rush of water, and then someone was beside her in the swift current, strong arms reaching out for her and pulling her nearer and nearer to the shore. As she felt the grass beneath her hands, Sasami collapsed against her rescuer, frightened tears overwhelming her as she realised she was safe.

“Kamidake.” She murmured, burying her head in his shoulder as the sobs shook through her. “I was so scared. I was so scared!”

“What happened, Lady Sasami?” Kamidake put a gentle finger

beneath her chin, lifting her face to his. “You can swim… you’re a good swimmer. What happened?”

“I don’t… I don’t know.” Sasami shook her head, tears still in her eyes. “I was on the bank, with… with Sakuya-chan. Then she reached out a hand to help me up and something happened. I don’t know what it was, but I… I fell back, into the water. And it was like… like something was in there with me. Pulling me down… trying to stop me from getting out. It was like something was trying to drown me, Kamidake! I was so scared!”

“Trying… to drown you?” Kamidake looked alarmed, getting to his feet and pulling his young companion up with him. “Did you see anyone else? Perhaps Miss Sakuya tried to rescue you?”

“No..Sakuya can’t swim.” Sasami shook her head, biting her teeth together to stop them chattering as a cold wind whipped through her. “I’m s… so cold. The water… was like ice.”

“We’ll go right back to the palace and you can dry off and change your gown.” Kamidake eyed her keenly. “That heavy fabric isn’t designed for dips in the stream — it probably pulled you down.”

“How did you know I was in trouble?” Sasami asked, as the knight took her firmly by the hand, leading her at a brisk pace across the grounds of the palace. Kamidake smiled.

“How do you think I knew?” He asked simply, and Sasami’s eyes became big as she remembered the gentle voice beneath the waves.

“Tsunami… called you to me?”

“It’s been a while since the Goddess called on me to serve her.” Kamidake nodded. “But when she calls, I know that it’s important.”

“She said help was coming. That was what she meant.” Sasami gripped his hand more tightly. “But you’re all wet too, Kamidake. Aren’t you cold?”

“I’m not afraid of a little cold, Hime-sama.” Kamidake assured her. “I’ve fought in worse conditions than this before. What matter is that you’re safe.”

“We must find Sakuya… she’s probably scared that something’s happened to me.” Sasami realised. Kamidake shook his head.

“First, you dry off. Your Father would never forgive me if I allowed you to take cold.” He said firmly. “Besides, wherever she is, Sakuya-san wasn’t by the river. I didn’t see her when I hurried down here, and I came down from the palace itself. She wasn’t on the path at all.”

“She might have gone back another way to look for help, or she might have got lost.”

“I don’t know, Hime. I just know she wasn’t there.” Kamidake said simply. Sasami frowned, glancing at her hands as another shiver ran through her.

“What happened to me when I fell, Tsunami?” She murmured. “What were those pictures? So many images and all so random and jumbled, nothing made sense.”

She sighed, shaking her head.

“I don’t know. It’s all a bit odd.” She acknowledged. “Maybe Sakuya isn’t worried about me at all. Maybe she thought Tsunami would save me.”

“How would she know anything about Tsunami, Hime-sama?” Kamidake looked surprised. Sasami shrugged.

“Ayeka told her about our connection, when she spoke to Sakuya about the Sumire.” She said. Kamidake frowned, shaking his head.

“No, Lady Sasami… that’s not possible.” He said quietly.

“But Sakuya said…”

“I was with Lady Ayeka when she and Lord Takeru spoke to the child. On a couple of occasions.” Kamidake said gently. “No mention was made of Tsunami, let alone your bond with her. Ayeka-sama knows that the connection you share is a matter of great importance to Jurai and Juraian security. She would not reveal it to anyone — especially not someone from outside Jurai’s borders.”

Sasami whitened, raising stricken eyes to her companion’s violet ones.

“But Sakuya knew all about it.” She whispered. “About me… being Tsunami… how?”

“I don’t know.” Kamidake admitted. “But you can rest assured that she didn’t learn of it from your noble sister.”

Sasami bit her lip, thoughts whirling through her head as she replayed her conversation with her friend. At length she shook her head.

“This is silly.” She muttered. “I’m going to get dry and then I’m going to go find Washu. If anyone knows about Tsunami it’s her, and since our trip to Kihaku I sort of think that she understands better than anyone else. When I’ve changed, I’m going down to her lab.”

“Do you want me to wait and escort you, Princess?” Kamidake asked, and Sasami glanced at him for a moment, then shook her head.

“No. You’re all wet and I don’t want you to catch a cold either.” She said firmly. “But thank you, Kamidake. Thank you for saving me, too. I… I didn’t really say it before, but I..I am glad you came.”

“That’s why I’m here, Hime-sama. To take care of you.” Kamidake grinned at her, and Sasami returned the grin, suddenly comforted. She nodded.

“I know. And it makes me very happy that you are.” She said, a faint pink blush touching her cheeks as she spoke. Then, as they reached the palace entrance, she cast him a playful smile, loosing her grip on his hand and darting in through the entrance before he could say anything else. As she hurried up the stairs to her chamber, she barely acknowledged any of the guards on duty, pushing back her door and grabbing her towel from it’s hook as she began to change her clothes.

As she towelled her hair dry, she cast a glance out of her window down to the ground below, watching Kamidake striding across the grass towards the annexe where he and Azaka had the best of the Knights’ quarters. She sank back against the palace wall, clutching her towel tightly to her as she bit her lip.

“Tsunami, this is mad.” She scolded. “You sent him on purpose, because you know I have a crush on him. You’re mean, sometimes.”

“*I sent someone who cared enough for your welfare to drop everything and come*.” Tsunami’s voice echoed around the chamber and Sasami jumped, almost dropping the towel in her surprise.

“Tsunami?” She whispered, her gaze darting towards the mirror pool that stood in the corner. As she inched closer to it, she saw the Goddess’s reflection glimmering on the surface and she sighed, putting out a tentative hand to meet Tsunami’s watery fingers.

“You were trying to tell me something, weren’t you, the day I met Sakuya in the Infirmary?” She murmured. “Weren’t you?”

“*Go to Washu*.” Tsunami spoke softly, and Sasami saw the gentle compassion flickering in her reflection’s crimson eyes. “*And stay safe, my sister. Much goes on that could be dangerous to both of us. Keep your wits about you, and trust only those who have proven themselves to you before*.”

“Well, I was going to go to Washu, anyway.” Sasami sighed. “You won’t tell me any more than that, Tsunami?”

"*Washu will be able to tell you anything you need to know*." Tsunami shook her head. "*My sense is vague — I only perceive bits and pieces, I don't have the whole picture. But I know that you might be in danger, and that those close to you may be, as well*."

"Great." Sasami grimaced. "Just when I thought I was safe and sound and a normal girl again."

She set down her towel, reaching for her fresh gown as she wriggled into it, loosing her hairties and brushing her thick hair out across her shoulders. For a moment she hesitated, then grabbed up her ties once more, self-consciously fastening the damp waves back from her face in imitation of the Goddess's own style.

"There." She said pensively. "What do you think, Tsunami? Do I look like you, now?"

"*You are me, so that is a foolish question, Sasami-chan*." There was genuine affection in the Goddess's voice, and despite herself, Sasami grinned.

"I suppose so." She agreed. "And you'll keep me safe, Tsunami — won't you?"

"*As much as I can, my sister*." Tsunami inclined her head, even as her image began to fade from the surface of the water. "*As much as I can.*"

For a moment Sasami gazed down into her own reflection, taking in her appearance with her hair styled in the different way.

"I do look like Tsunami a lot more this way." She realised. "It's almost spooky, but I suppose it is thanks to her I didn't drown today… for sending Kamidake to help me, and for not letting me give up when I didn't think I could swim any more. But what about Sakuya? What happened to her? I wish I knew what was going on here."

She frowned, a determined expression touching her face.

"Well, I'm going to see Washu." She said decidedly. "And then maybe things will start to make some sense!"

"What exactly is this all about, Ayeka-chan?"

Haru eyed his eldest daughter with a harried frown, setting aside the documents he had been scanning and sitting down in the chair of his study, his gaze flitting from the Princess to her companion. "And Ryoko — you too. You're not usually so brazen as to enter my private

work quarters… what can you be doing here?"

"Father, we want to talk to you, alone." Ayeka said meaningfully, casting a sidelong glance towards the guard on duty by the door even as Ryoko bristled at the Prince's words. Haru frowned, but nodded, raising his hand in a dismissive gesture towards the uniformed man. The guard bowed his head, obediently withdrawing from the study, and Haru sat back in his seat, folding his arms across his chest. To Ryoko, he looked even more weasly and thin-faced than ever, his brow creased in preoccupation over the recent events surrounding Jurai.

"Well, you have your wish, musume-chan." The Prince spoke quietly. "Although I can't imagine what's so important it should interrupt my work. You know that this Sumire business is a top priority and your Uncle…"

We came to speak about the Sumire. "Ryoko cut across him quietly, dropping down into a vacant seat and kicking her legs up onto the edge of the Prince's desk." That's why we're here."

"Ryoko, can't you at least pretend to show some respect for your surroundings?" Haru glowered at her, reaching across to knock her feet off the edge of the oak-polished surface. "This isn't some pirate hangout deep in the wilds of space. This is the office of a Prince of the realm and you'd do well to remember it."

"Yes, and *you'd* do well to remember that I'm your great niece." Ryoko shot back. "The Emperor at least calls me Ryoko-*san*. You could try and do the same, once in a while. It wouldn't kill you to acknowledge me, considering that I've come here to help. Ayeka and I both have. We might know more than you do about the Sumire at the moment, so you'd better reassess your attitude if you want to find out what that is."

"Ryoko, Father, stop it." Ayeka held up her hands, a look of frustration on her face. "This isn't getting us anywhere. I'm scared, and this is important! Stop fighting about silly things… I want to get to the bottom of this and stop if from happening again!"

"Stop what from happening again?" Haru demanded, even as Ryoko sent the Princess a grimace, holding up her hands in mock-surrender. "Ayeka, stop talking in riddles. I'm a busy man… what's the matter?"

"We want to know about Yugi Kuroda." Ayeka said quietly. "And her mother, Yukari."

For a moment there was deathly silence in the room, as Haru

digested his daughter's words. Then, at length, he glanced up, shaking his head.

"I don't know either name." He said quietly. "They're both new to me. What about them?"

"You're such a liar." Ryoko narrowed her gaze. "You remember them as well as I do. The look on your face says it all. It's right there, in your eyes. You know exactly who we're talking about."

"Moderate your language and your accusations, Ryoko-*san*, else you'll find yourself cooling heels in a cell, not a palace chamber." Haru said darkly. "How dare you accuse a Prince of Jurai of dishonesty?"

"It seems to run in the blood." Ryoko said frankly. "Stop it, and tell us the truth. We need to know what you know. It might be important."

"Please, Daddy." Ayeka sent him an emploring look. "If Ryoko's right and you do remember… please. Tell us. Tell us about Yugi and Yukari Kuroda."

Haru hesitated for a moment, and Ryoko saw him send his daughter a stricken look. He heaved a weighty sigh, rubbing his temples.

"Yugi and Yukari Kuroda are no concern of yours, or mine, or Jurai's. Not now." He said softly. "It's not important that you know anything about them, Ayeka. They're long gone."

"What if they're not?" Ryoko demanded. "Look, smart alec, lets stop this messing around. When Ayeka and I were kids, Yukari Kuroda was sentenced to death for treason, wasn't she? She was executed on the old jerk's orders — sent into the sun on account of her crimes. Her daughter Yugi was exiled to deep space, and that was the end of that. How am I doing so far? Does any of this jog your memory?"

It was impossible for Haru to go any whiter, and as she glanced at him, Ryoko realised that it was not shock but anger that had his hands shaking above his desk.

"Who on earth told you anything about that?" He demanded in low tones. "Yukari Kuroda — and her sentence — are top secret. Nobody knew about that outside of the palace."

"I was here, you idiot." Ryoko snorted. "I was Azusa's ward, remember? Your father — the old jerk Shigure — he didn't like me, so he had me confined to the servant's quarters and I didn't associate with you and your fine living as much as maybe I should have. But I

was there. And I saw Yukari's execution. And it wasn't so much of a secret, so you're still lying to us. The whole planet turned out for it. They all came to see the demon sent into the sun."

"Father?" Ayeka asked uncertaintly. "Is Ryoko right? Is that what happened?"

Haru sighed, the anger draining out of him as he met his daughter's gaze. Slowly, he nodded his head.

"My father was deeply suspicious of Yukari and her influence at court." He said carefully. "And he suspected that she was involved in the death of her husband. You have to realise, both of you, that Jurai had suffered at the hands of Kagato only a handful of years earlier. That was a time when I was afraid even to have you and your mother on Jurai in case you were at risk, musume-chan. When Yukari Kuroda's behaviour began to be extreme, and when people who opposed her at court began to die in mysterious circumstances, we had to take action. And so we did."

"So that was her treason." Ryoko's eyes narrowed. "She murdered high standing members of the Royal Court?"

"Yes… and it was *how* she did it, not just the fact that she did." Haru agreed darkly. "She was a demon, Ryoko. Just like you… she had evil magic beyond that of Jurai and she used that evil to corrupt and destroy the planet she had begun to call home. Her husband was the first to fall — she cast a spell on him to make him love her, and then she slew him, inheriting his money and his status as his widow. Over the course of thirteen years she must have arranged the deaths of thirty or forty high standing noble representatives. Eventually the trail led back to her door… it was impossible to ignore."

"*I am not a demon*!" Ryoko reacted angrily. "I'm half Juraian and I'm half Kii! I've never killed anyone in my life, whatever you might think of me! And I do not use subversive magics to subdue, slay or otherwise manipulate important people at Jurai's court!"

"Ryoko." Ayeka held up her hand, shaking her head slightly. "Not right now. That isn't important."

She frowned.

"So if this did happen, Father, why can't I remember it?" She asked. "Ryoko and I are about the same age. If she recalls it, why don't I?"

"Do you think that I would have allowed a small child of maybe eleven to witness such a thing?" Haru demanded. "Don't be foolish. Execution is not something generally discussed with juvenile

Princesses, even those who will one day be Empress of all Jurai."

"All right." Ayeka pursed her lips. "That's true, I suppose. I mean, it wouldn't have been nice. And Ryoko did say that she was dragged along to see it — that she remembered it because the woman called her a demon and threatened her with the same fate. I don't always know much about the work you do, even now. It does make sense that I wouldn't know about it then, too."

"And Yugi Kuroda?" Ryoko pressed. "If Yukari existed, Yugi must have done, too. Or is your selective Juraian memory reluctant to bring that one out from beneath the cobwebs?"

"Jurai went through a very difficult time between the betrayal of Kagato and the execution of Lady Kuroda." Haru said quietly. "My father lost his life in a battle with Kain, and Azusa lost his son to the Earth. The succession relied on a baby who was still young and vulnerable to influence and harm. Naturally my lady wife and I were fearful for Ayeka's safety. We were always fearful of that. In the months before Ayeka was conceived, Misaki lost a baby, and we have never believed it to have been a natural accident. Before she was murdered, my sister confessed to me that she believed Kagato had been responsible for Misaki's miscarriage. In light of that, fatherhood took on a whole new and frightening role when Misaki told me she was expecting again. When so much rested on your head, Ayeka — we had to protect you. You realise that, don't you? You were Jurai's future — but you were also our whole world."

"Father." Ayeka's expression softened, and she offered him a smile. "I know that. I know you and Mother have always been protective of both Sasami and I."

"But..?" Ryoko's eyes narrowed. "I sense a 'but' in this discussion somewhere. What about the Kuroda girl, Haru? I remember her quite clearly. Fair hair, big aqua eyes, always stuck on herself and her opinions. And I remember that she spent time with Ayeka. So if that's true, you can't pretend you don't know who she is. Prevaricating with some meaningless protective father babble isn't going to answer our questions. Who was she, what happened to her, and why was she sent from Jurai? What exactly did she do?"

Haru was silent, biting his lip, and Ryoko let out a cry of frustration, getting to her feet and banging her fists down on the Prince's desk.

"Listen to me, Haru-dono, we're not going anywhere until you tell us the truth." She said darkly, her eyes blazing with defiance. "Last

night your beloved elder daughter turned psycho and tried to put an end to me. See these scratches across my throat? Ayeka's nails did that. And we both know that she wasn't in her right mind at the time. This morning, Ayeka went visiting Lady Tokimi, and almost blasted her to hell with her Jurai power… fortunately for Tokimi, Kiyone was there and intervened. And unless tree-cutting has become a national pastime, your Crown Princess also took a blade to Tsunami's tree within the past few days. Now, all of those things are not normal Ayeka behaviour. She might be uptight and sometimes a bit scary to be around. But she's not normally homicidal and I think you'll agree that it's strange Ayeka doesn't remember *doing* any of those things. And oddly enough, Ayeka also doesn't remember Yugi Kuroda, even though she so clearly existed. People have already died… so I think it's time you told us exactly what you know."

Haru stared up at the pirate with stricken red eyes, and Ryoko knew she had hit her mark.

"Ayeka…" he murmured. "No. You… it can't…"

"Ryoko is right, Father." Ayeka said sadly. "All those things… she's right. But I don't remember. And I'm scared. Washu and Kiyone have a police file about Yugi Kuroda… she was sealed up in the vicinity of Kihaku, wasn't she?"

Haru gazed at his daughter as if seeing her for the first time. Very slowly, he nodded his head.

"And Kihaku's explosion broke the capsule." Ryoko said bluntly, dropping back into her seat with a thud. "Setting her free to slaughter her way across the universe."

It was impossible for Haru to go any whiter, and he swallowed hard, fear flickering across his dark red eyes.

"No." He whispered. "We took care… we took care of… of it all."

"Father, if you know something, you need to tell us." Ayeka said quietly. "Washu and Kiyone have evidence to suggest that the Kuroda girl is behind everything that's been going on. And if that's true, and she is using me in some way, I want to know how and why. Has she done this before? Is that why I don't remember who she is?"

Haru sighed, and to Ryoko, he looked older and more haggard than she had ever seen him before. He hung his head, refusing to meet either woman's eye.

"Yugi was a childhood playmate of yours, Ayeka-chan." He said softly. "We didn't know, of course, the dangers. Not then. It was only

late on that we were able to lay crimes at Yukari's door… or implicate the child in any of her nefarious practices. Yugi was a year or two older than you, but you spent time together anyway. You seemed to be close friends."

He glanced up at this, sending Ryoko a guilty glance.

"It was partly my fault you were exiled to the serving quarters, Ryoko." He added. "And I pushed for you to be sent to the colonies, also. I wanted you away from my little girl… as far away as possible."

"Yes. I know. I overheard enough of your chats with Azusa to know that." Ryoko said coldly. "I was bad blood, wasn't I? A demon in waiting. Something like that."

"I was scared." Haru admitted. "Yugi seemed such an ordinary child. But Ayeka… sometimes… there were moments she would do things. Unexpected things. She'd act up in a way she'd never done before. As time went on, it only became worse. Her behaviour… it became wild and it was difficult to conceal."

"My behaviour?" Ayeka's eyes became big. "But I don't remember any of this… none of it at all!"

"No, and you wouldn't, my child." Haru sighed. "You see, your mother and I, we made a decision. We did a terrible thing, all things considered. But we did it to protect you. To protect Jurai's future."

"You exiled Yugi." Ryoko pursed her lips. Haru shook his head.

"No…" He said hesitantly. "Not exactly."

"Then what?" Ayeka looked fearful, and Haru bit his lip.

"When Sasami was little more than a baby, your behaviour became even more uncontrollable than it had been before." He said unwillingly, dropping his gaze once more. "You seemed so violently opposed to the new baby that we feared for Sasami's safety. Or at least, I did. Your mother always maintained — still maintains — that you would rather die than hurt Sasami. And these days, I believe that to be the truth."

"Of course it is." Ayeka looked indignant. "I love my sister… why would I ever hurt her?"

"I ask myself that question, sometimes." Haru pursed his lips. "But hurt her you did, my child. There was an incident…"

He faltered, and Ayeka was on her feet, anger flaring in her red eyes.

“This isn’t true! I would never harm Sasami!” She exclaimed. “Never, do you hear me? *Never*!”

“One morning, when we were still sleeping, you crept into Sasami’s nursery.” Haru said softly, meeting his daughter’s gaze at long last and Ryoko was startled to see the depth of the anguish that rested there. “You took the child from her crib, and left the palace complex. You went to the stream, and you dropped your baby sister into the rushing water. Then you stood there, intent on watching her as she drowned.”

“I *didn’t*!” Tears sprang into Ayeka’s red eyes. “Father, I didn’t! You’re lying! I wouldn’t! I didn’t! I *couldn’t*!”

“That is what your mother maintains to this day.” Haru acknowledged. “And yet you were seen — by several members of household staff who rushed to Sasami’s rescue. The baby was within an inch of her life when she was pulled from the cold water. I believe only Tsunami’s spirit within her kept her alive that day. She was so small, and unable to protect herself.”

“Ayeka.” Ryoko whispered, as the tears ran down Ayeka’s cheeks. “For real?”

“I didn’t.” Ayeka repeated. “Why are you saying these things? *I didn’t*!”

“It was at that point that we discovered the depths of Yugi’s influence over you.” Haru said sadly. “That she had gone beyond the bonds of friendship and begun influencing your thoughts and actions in ways that could only be detrimental to those around you. That the attack on Sasami was not of your will is beyond doubt, Ayeka. That somehow she coerced you to do it has always been the recognised opinion. So we took steps… we took steps to ensure that you never had to live with the guilt of hurting your sister. And we swore that we would make sure you and Sasami grew up close — that we’d somehow make you understand that she was someone to be loved, not someone sent to replace you in our hearts.”

Ayeka buried her head in her hands, her sobs overwhelming her, and Ryoko’s eyes narrowed.

“What kind of steps?” She asked quietly. Haru glanced at his hands.

“Ayeka’s memories of the event, and her alliance with Yugi, were suppressed.” He said softly. “Yugi was exiled, and that was the end of that. Ayeka remembered nothing of the event and those who had known anything about it were sworn to secrecy on pain of grave penalties should they ever speak of it again. Many of them are no

longer in royal service. It was as if it never happened."

He bit his lip.

"That is why you were isolated also, Ryoko." He admitted. "From the palace and then from Jurai itself. To begin with, I thought you were responsible for Ayeka's actions. And then, when Yugi was gone, I became paranoid about your continued presence on Jurai. Your magic was alien and I didn't know if I could trust it. So I wanted you as far from my children as possible. You must not blame Azusa for your treatment. He would dearly have liked to have kept you, but the Emperor and I both made it untenable for him to even consider the matter."

He sighed.

"Although even my father did not have the final, casting vote at the time. The blame is, almost in its entirety, mine."

Ryoko was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then she shook her head.

"You really are some kind of monster, you know that?" She said quietly, eyes flickering in disgust as she got to her feet, putting a hand on Ayeka's shoulder. "Come on, Ayeka. Let's go back to Washu and tell her what we've found. I think we've both had enough of this kind of company for one day… don't you?"

"How could you." Ayeka pulled away from Ryoko, wheeling on her father and banging her hands down on the desk in a fit of pique that would have rivalled Ryoko's own earlier attempts. "How could you do that to me? And lie to me all this time? *How could you*! You made me believe something that wasn't true — and you made me hate Ryoko when all the time Ryoko didn't do anything wrong except end up on Jurai an orphan! You infected me with your paranoia and yet the one I should have been fearful of is *you*! Ryoko is right — you *are* a monster, to do that to your own daughter!"

"Ayeka…" Haru looked stricken, and Ryoko sent him the filthiest look she could muster, slipping an arm around the Princess's shoulders.

"Forget about it." She said softly. "Now we know, we can take steps. It's not going to happen again. We're going to get to the bottom of this, and we're going to resolve it, once and for all."

Ayeka buried her head in Ryoko's shoulder, still shaking with her tears, and Haru got to his feet, but Ryoko held out her hand, a forcefield flickering up between them.

“No. Don’t.” She said bluntly. “You’ve done enough to both of us. Stay there. Ayeka doesn’t need you right now.”

Ayeka raised her gaze to Ryoko’s, eyes still swimming with despair.

“You tell Washu.” She whispered. “I need… I need to find Sasami. I need to… I need to tell her…”

She broke off, sending her father a final, heartbreaking look. Then she pulled free of Ryoko’s grip, fleeing the study and banging the door behind her.

For a moment there was silence, as prince and pirate eyed one another in mutual suspicion.

“I didn’t mean to hurt her.” Haru said at length. “What would you do, if it was your child?”

“I would tell her the truth.” Ryoko said acidly. “I’ve been lied to my whole life too, and I know how it feels. And I’m not a bit surprised that it was you who wanted rid of me from Jurai, Haru. I’ve always laid the blame at your door, anyway. You might be a Prince but you’re definitely not worthy of any title. Whatever Ayeka went through then, pretending it never happened is no way to solve anything. All it does is create more questions later on. Right now, Yugi Kuroda is probably on Jurai, and thanks to your silence, she’s been able to kill people. She might yet kill more. She might spill more blood across Ayeka’s hands than just mine — think about that for a while, will you? And just remember that, if she does, the blame won’t be on Ayeka’s head. It will be on *yours*, for playing God with your daughter’s memory!”

With that she flickered her form out of the study, re-materialising on the grass outside the palace as she struggled to contain her own emotions.

“Ayeka and I always had such animosity as children, but really, all we had was Haru’s paranoia keeping us apart.” She realised. “If not for that… if not for that… then what? I don’t know, but right now I’m angry for her. I should find her… she’s in no state to be running loose around the palace. We might have had our differences, but I know how she’s feeling. And if I can help — well, we… we’re family. So I should. That’s what Tenchi would say. Damn Azusa for spiriting my fiance away this morning! Maybe he’d be better than me at dealing with this. He’s good at that sympathetic talking stuff. But right now I need to try and find her. That’s important… and so is figuring out what Haru said in terms of what’s been happening now. There’s no doubt in my mind that Washu and Kiyone are right. This is the Kuroda girl’s work, and her target probably is still Sasami.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

“So if you remember anything else, Tokimi, it’s really important that you tell us about it right away.”

Washu sat down in the spacious Tennan solar, casting Suki a warm smile as she accepted a steaming mug of hot green tea. “Thank you, Suki — after all the work we’ve been doing, this is very welcome.”

“Well, I’m still not sure I’m happy about any of this — particularly not Seiryo being involved.” Suki bit her lip. “But if Sasami-chan is in danger and if someone really wants to hurt Tokimi, I guess we can’t help but play it out. I just don’t like all of this secrecy and intrigue. I’d much rather everything on Jurai was calm again.”

She handed the last mug to Seiryo, taking her own seat as she cast her brother a troubled glance. “You look pale, Nii-chan. You shouldn’t be over-pushing yourself, even now.”

“I’m fine, Suki. Just tired.” Seiryo dismissed her concern with a flick of his hand. “This is more important. Tokimi, Washu and I both realise you were scared last night and that whatever it was isn’t something you want to remember. But if you can tell us anything at all, we need to know. Sasami’s life might depend on it. So might Jurai.”

Tokimi was silent for a moment, big eyes darting between Washu and Seiryo as she absorbed the seriousness of their expressions. Her lip trembled slightly, and she shook her head, murmuring something faintly under her breath. Washu strained to hear it, and as she leant forward, she caught the final two words, her brow creasing.

“A demon shadow?” She asked, sending Seiryo a non-plussed glance. “Is that what you said, Tokimi? Sasami had a demon’s shadow?”

Tokimi looked blank and Washu sighed, repeating her question in Kii. At this Tokimi suddenly became very animated, raising her hands in a frantic gesture and nodding her head. She began speaking in swift, excited Kii phrases, and even to Washu’s ears they were hard to make out.

“Tokimi, please… more slowly.” She begged. “If you can’t tell us in

Galactic Tongue, tell us in Kii by all means. But slowly, so I can understand what you mean. Right now I'm confused and I don't know what you want to tell me."

Tokimi frowned, holding a hand out to her sister and carefully Washu took it, squeezing it tightly.

"Noone will hurt you. No demons, nobody." She promised, now lapsing into her native tongue herself as she strove to make her companion understand. "We want to know so we can protect you. And so we can protect Sasami, Tokimi. Tsunami. She's in danger and you know that, don't you? So tell me exactly what you saw. I need to know as much as you can tell me, if I'm going to help make this demon go away."

Tokimi eyed her doubtfully for a moment, and Washu could tell that the girl's native superstitions about demons and evil forces still held good within her. For a moment she seemed to fight with herself, then her eyes hardened as a look of determination crossed her features. She nodded her head slowly.

"The demon was Tsunami's shadow." She said softly, speaking in slow, precise Kii and for a brief instant, Washu almost wondered if her companion was completely lucid, so calm and resolute did she seem. "Behind Tsunami, at the courtroom. There was a demon there. A demon with golden hair. She was looking at Tokimi. When I looked at her, I knew she was evil. And she knew that I knew."

"What did she say?" Seiryo asked anxiously. "I heard her mention Tsunami's name — what did she see at this thing anyway?"

"A demon with golden hair." Washu turned, sending him a solemn look. "It does sound very much like we've hit the nail on the head, Seiryo-sama. We already know that Yugi had fair hair, from Ryoko's description."

"Onee-chan?"

Tokimi tilted her head on one side, her brow creased in concentration as she struggled to bring her thoughts into coherent focus. "The demon was a child. A child like Tsunami. But she was something else, too. She wasn't like Tsunami. She wasn't like Tokimi or Nii-chan or Washu. She was… different."

"In what way, Tokimi-chan?" Washu asked gently. "Can you explain? I'm not sure I understand."

"Tsunami is old but Sasami is young." Tokimi frowned, shaking her head slowly. "The demon is old but the demon is young… I don't

understand either. It was wrong. The demon was older. But the demon was young. And there was only the demon. Not Tsunami, or Sasami. Just demon."

"Washu-sama?" Suki asked softly, and Washu sent a befuddled shrug in the young noblewoman's direction.

"Now she's lost me." She admitted. "She said that the demon is old and young, but not Tsunami or Sasami. And that Sasami is young and Tsunami is old… but… no, I don't know how to translate it in any way that makes sense. Even in Kii, it doesn't make any sense."

"Perhaps it does." Seiryo looked thoughtful. "If you're right about Sasami-sama being the Goddess's chosen one, then you're saying Lady Sasami is both Sasami and Tsunami. And Tokimi sees that, doesn't she? She sees Tsunami and Sasami and she understands they're the same person, despite their differences."

"Yes." Washu agreed, then her face cleared. "Oh! I think I see what you're getting at. Tokimi saw the demon, and the demon was young, but somehow she was older than she seemed. Tokimi just couldn't explain it, because it wasn't like Sasami and Tsunami. There was one personality, but two ages. Is that what you mean?"

"I think so." Seiryo nodded. His eyes narrowed, and he sent Tokimi a keen glance.

"Tokimi, tell me something." He said gently. "This demon, she was a child, wasn't she? A little girl, with long blond hair. That's right, isn't it? She looked like she was the same age as Lady Sasami."

Slowly Tokimi nodded her head.

"But she's not the same age at all, is she?" Seiryo sighed. "Yugi was sealed in a suspension capsule. She's still a child in body, but an adult in spirit. That's what Tokimi means. Yugi's soul grew up but her body did not. Maybe that's why she's so easily able to dispense with it, or change the way people perceive her. If any of this makes sense, that has to be considered as an explanation."

"More than that." Washu drummed her fingers on her knee. "Tokimi, I want you to think very carefully back to the Juraian court function. When you saw Sasami, was there anyone else with her? Lady Ayeka, or anyone that you knew? Kiyone-san? Suki-sama? Anyone at all?"

Tokimi stared at her sister, then shook her head.

"Only demon with yellow hair." She whispered softly. "With

Tsunami."

"Then I think we just explained how Sakuya Kumashiro survived the Sumire massacre." Washu got to her feet, her expression grim. "She didn't."

"Meaning that Sakuya Kumashiro is actually Yugi Kuroda?" Seiryo's eyes widened, and Washu nodded.

"Best guess." She agreed briskly. "You said Sakuya was with Sasami when all of this happened. Sakuya even said Tokimi was staring at her. But Tokimi did not see Sakuya. She saw the demon — she saw Yugi. If Yugi can distort people's perceptions enough to make her invisible, then she can distort people's perceptions enough to take on the form of someone else. Only Tokimi and I are different… our magic is so old that very few spells and facades can fool it adequately. And Yugi is not as old as we are… so she has never encountered Kii sight before. That's my hypothesis, Lord Tennan. That the Sakuya girl was probably killed at the same time as her father — and Yugi simply assumed her identity as a means of getting to Jurai."

"And getting close to Sasami-sama." Seiryo's eyes glittered with angry understanding. "We should have seen that before."

"Maybe, but who would suspect a child?" Washu spread her hands helplessly. "Tokimi is here, and people here fear her. They have their scapegoat, so Sakuya's ruse is safe."

"Sasami has taken Sakuya-san under her wing, since she came to Jurai." Suki looked anxious. "With Mother being so unwell recently, I've been tied here more and more. I haven't really had a chance to meet her. But Sasami has a big heart, and she'd want to help someone she thought had been through such a terrible tragedy."

"Then we need to act and quickly." Washu said gravely. "We need to find Ryoko and especially find Ayeka, before Yugi can use her as a vessel again. Suki, you and Tokimi need to stay here. It might get dangerous and neither one of you can really defend yourselves, if it comes to a confrontation."

Suki's eyes narrowed.

"You forget, Lady Washu, that *I* am the one with Tennan blood on my hands." She said bitterly. "And I don't want harm to come to Sasami either. She's my friend — she's the first friend I've ever really had. If I can do something, I want to help."

"You can help best by protecting Tokimi, Suki-chan." Seiryo said gently. "She really is helpless, without her Kii magic, and she's already

been threatened once. Washu is right — this is where you should stay. I won't have either of you put in the line of fire."

"And what about *you*?" Suki protested. "You're not even one hundred percent fit yourself, and you'll charge into a face-off with a creature that's murdered innocent people with seemingly no effort at all?"

"I'm going to uphold the oath I took to my Emperor, to protect Jurai's interests." Seiryo said frankly, his hand hovering over the hilt of his sword as he spoke, and Washu sent him a warm smile, nodding her head.

"And I'm going to teach this Yugi girl that messing with my family isn't an option." She said simply. "Suki, nothing will happen to Seiryo. I promise… whatever idiotic heroics he thinks he's going into, I have fairly powerful magic and my reading over the past few weeks has taught me a little bit about stopping demons. Plus, Yugi may have miscalculated Sasami's own strength. Tsunami is her protector… there is no greater force in the universe than that."

"You'll see my brother safe?" Suki looked doubtful, and Seiryo let out an impatient exclamation, embarrassment in his eyes.

"I don't need a minder!" He objected, and Suki sent him a dark look, shaking her head.

"You don't always make the best decisions, and sometimes you act foolishly." She said crisply, seeming so far removed from her usual, shy persona that Washu was both startled and entertained by the girl's change in demeanour. "You're still recovering from the last bad decision you made, and I am not prepared to tell Mother that something awful has befallen her beloved only son. So you take care, and come back in one piece. I won't go through all of this again — no matter what oath you've sworn or to whom."

Much to Washu's amusement, Seiryo looked suitably meek as he took his sister's hands in his.

"I'll be all right." He said softly. "And I've learnt things too, Suki-chan. Don't worry. I'll come back safely. But Washu-sama and I need to go and now. With Tokimi's help, we might have put all the pieces of the puzzle together — and Sasami-sama's life may well rest in our hands."

"Washu isn't here?"

Sasami bit her lip, glancing around the room full of contraptions,

boxes and wires with a troubled look on her young face. “Oh… I did think that she would be. You and she seem to spend a lot of time in here the last few days, and I really wanted to speak to her. Do you know where she’s gone, Kiyone? It might be important and I don’t want to go hunting if I can help it.”

“She went with Seiryo Tennan to speak to Tokimi.” Kiyone pushed back her chair, swivelling it so that she faced the young princess. “She’ll come back here, though, so you might as well wait with me, Sasami. It’s as safe a place as any, I suppose.”

“As safe a place?” Sasami echoed her friend’s words, pursing her lips as she obediently came to join the detective. She clambered up onto one of the units, swinging her legs absently against the steel boxes underneath as she made herself comfortable. “What do you mean?”

“It’s such a long story.” Kiyone sighed. “You probably don’t even want to know.”

Sasami was silent for a moment, glancing thoughtfully down at the floor as she digested this. Then she raised her gaze, meeting Kiyone’s blue eyes with troubled crimson ones of her own.

“Something tried to kill me this morning.” She said softly. “And the more I tell myself it didn’t, the more I know it did. Only I don’t know how to explain it, and that’s why I came to Washu. Now you say this is a safe place, Kiyone. Do you think someone wants to hurt you too?”

“Sasami…” Kiyone stared at her companion, horror crossing her expression at the Princess’s words. “Tried to *kill* you? But…”

“I fell into the stream that runs across the palace grounds.” Sasami nodded, reaching an absent hand up to touch her still-damp locks. “I can swim, Kiyone. I’ve swum there so many times. But this time it was like something was pulling me down into the water. It wanted my head to go under, and didn’t want me to come back up again. Tsunami helped me, and she sent Kamidake to rescue me, because I was too tired to swim to shore. But it… it was strange, Kiyone. And I know I didn’t imagine it. I know that… that there was something there.”

“You probably didn’t imagine it.” Kiyone looked grave. “Come take a look at this, then… we would have spoken to you about it sooner or later, I guess, but we’ve only just worked out that it involves — or rather, revolves around you.”

“Around me?” Sasami skipped off the unit, coming to peer over the Detective’s shoulder at the file on the screen. As she skimmed through

the words, her face paled, and she shook her head slowly.

“More evil.” She whispered. “Is that all that I do? Bring evil to Jurai in search of Tsunami?”

“I think this evil came from Jurai and just returned to get her revenge.” Kiyone said blackly. “Tokimi saw her last night, Sasami. That’s why she got so upset, and why Washu and Seiryo have gone to speak to her. They think she might know something important, and they’re probably right.”

“Probably.” Sasami nodded, sighing heavily as she remembered Tokimi’s wild outburst at the court function. “And at the Infirmary — did Tokimi see her there too?”

“I suppose she did. But she’s the only one who’s been able to see her, so far.” Kiyone responded. “Either this Yugi girl has kept out of Washu’s way, or by fluke the two haven’t encountered one another yet. Still, we’re pretty sure this girl is what Tokimi was so frantic about. And this girl is also the reason so many people have died. Her mother was executed for treason… stands to reason the kid would want some sort of revenge.”

“So maybe she just wants to kill me because the Emperor then killed her mother.” Sasami said pensively. “That might not be so bad, you know. If she just wanted me dead because I was a Princess, not because I was a Goddess.”

“Sometimes I wonder about your concept of ‘not so bad’.” Kiyone said dryly. “I wouldn’t be happy either way. In fact, it almost doesn’t matter why. The end result is still the same… and for someone whose life was threatened only a few hours ago, you’re far too calm for me.”

“I suppose I’m not quite sure what I think, yet.” Sasami admitted. “I am scared, Kiyone, but I also have faith in Tsunami to help me somehow. She told me to speak to Washu. She said that she’d know, and that somehow she’d be able to explain more easily what was going on.”

“Better able than Tsunami?” Kiyone looked startled. “I thought your Goddess knew everything.”

“She holds the minds and hearts of all Juraians that are connected to her by blood.” Sasami shook her head. “And through her bond with me, she can reach out to those I’ve made close friends of mine, also. That’s how she saved Washu’s life, aboard Tsunami-fune six months ago. But she can’t reach beyond that until she is me. I mean, until we’re one person. She has her limits. And whoever this Yugi person is,

she's not part of the Royal Tree. She's probably not even wholly Juraian — and she's certainly not someone I'm close to."

"I suppose there's only so much Tsunami can do while she's still dead." Kiyone remarked, and Sasami shrugged.

"I don't think of her as dead. Not if she's me." She replied. "But she can't do everything. At least, right at the moment, she can't. I'm her only connection to the real world."

"Well, I've no doubt Washu will be back here soon enough." Kiyone shrugged her shoulders. "Your sister and Ryoko are also on a fact-finding errand — they've gone to find out what your Father remembers about this girl and her mother, so we may even have a complete picture by the time they return. And then we'll be able to find a way to stop this Yugi girl and get things back to the way they should be. I can go back to Headquarters with my name cleared, you'll be safe, and Tokimi will stop shrieking about demons."

"You're not supposed to be doing any work at all, while you're here." Sasami remembered, a reproachful tone in her voice. "Where did that file come from, anyway? Did you go through Uncle's computers or something?"

"No, I brought it here from Headquarters. Actually, from a case I was working on before they were silly enough to discharge me." Kiyone shook her head. "And I'm glad that I did. I don't like questions without answers, Sasami… and this file sure seems full of answers."

"Yes, I imagine that's probably true, Detective Makibi."

At the sound of the voice, both Sasami and Kiyone turned, registering the presence of another in the doorway of the lab. "It must make fascinating reading for one such as yourself. One of you *Galaxy Police* who are so keen on interfering in business that is not your own."

"Sakuya-chan?" Sasami's eyes opened wide with surprise as she registered the odd expression on her friend's face. "But what are you… why are you…?"

"Sakuya-chan." The girl narrowed her eyes, shaking her head with a snort of contempt. "Sakuya Kumashiro is not on Jurai, Princess Sasami. She never was. She never got here. She was useful to me, so I kept her name alive for as long as I needed. I stole her memories and made good use of them — you were all so easily fooled. But it doesn't matter any more. I'm not playing any more games — not now I've found what I'm looking for."

“Yugi.” Kiyone murmured, and Sakuya nodded her head, a malevolent smile touching her lips.

“You have been busy, reading all about me, haven’t you.” She said, in dangerously low tones. “Well, if it makes you feel better, I have done a lot of reading about you, too. About *all* of you. About you strange people who seem to believe you can stop me from achieving my final objective.”

“Sakuya… is… *dead*?” Sasami faltered. “But… but…”

“You are as stupid as you seem, Princess Sasami.” Sakuya’s eyes glowed with an eerie aqua light as before them her outward appearance blurred and changed into that of another. As the light faded, a girl of about thirteen stood before them, long fair hair flickering in an imaginary breeze. There was a childlike innocence to her young face, and yet in the depths of her eyes was the hatred of one much older — one who had had a lot of time to dwell and brood, and with whom reasoning would be next to impossible.

“I am Yugi Kuroda.” She said softly. “And the two things I seek most on this miserable planet are conveniently right here in this room.”

She raised a hand towards the computer and Kiyone let out a screech, grabbing Sasami and pulling her to the ground as the console exploded into a glittering fountain of shrapnel. Yugi let out a low chuckle, and Sasami felt her friend tense.

“It *was* you on my ship!” The detective cried out, as more computer screens buckled and exploded around them. “You *did* wreck Yagami! You *did* seek to frame me!”

“No… you were never important enough to want to frame, Kiyone Makibi.” Yugi sent her a derisive look. “You are just a detective, and not a very high ranking one at that. I kill detectives for fun, or hadn’t you realised that? I hate all Galaxy Police and if I hadn’t had more pressing matters to attend to, I would have slain a lot more of them, too.”

She sighed, her shoulders twitching into a careless shrug as she glowered down on her prey.

“I would have killed *you*, only you had something that I needed, and I didn’t know where I could find it. I searched your *Yagami*, and I searched your office, but I did not find it in those places. So I had to let you go — and then I had to watch you — to learn if you really knew anything about me, or if you were as foolish as the rest. But

you're not foolish, are you? You're smarter than most of those buffoons at Headquarters. You believe in things that even the eye can't see or explain — you're still willing to cling on to your belief in your own memories, even if those around you refuse to listen. For you, that's an unfortunate trait… you were not important enough to kill, until you went to such extremes to find out who I was and why I was acting in this manner."

"So the two things you seek are the file, and Tsunami." Kiyone said quietly. "But you're the fool if you think you can kill Sasami so easily as that. Very powerful people have tried to rid Jurai of their Goddess, Yugi. What makes you think you're going to succeed? She's strong and she can fight back. You underestimate the strength of her magic."

"And *you* underestimate the strength of her love."

Yugi let out an amused peal of laughter, tilting her head on one side and offering Sasami a predatorial smile. "I already did a little test this morning, to see whether or not Princess Sasami would be easy to kill… and as I thought, Tsunami came to her rescue. But what if the enemy she was fighting wasn't me at all? What if the one who sought to harm Tsunami wasn't Yugi Kuroda… but someone much more dear to Sasami's young, soft, naive little heart?"

Her smile widened, as the door slid back to reveal a second figure, and Sasami let out an exclamation, getting to her feet.

"*Ayeka*! Ayeka-oneechan, what are you…?"

"No, Sasami, stay back!" Kiyone reached out a desperate hand, grabbing the Princess by the sleeve and pulling her back down onto the ground. "Ayeka is under Yugi's spell — she'll hurt you! She's already gone for Ryoko once of late. Don't let her trick you!"

"I knew you weren't a fool. Again, it counts against you." Yugi's eyes narrowed, and she sent a blast of psychic energy in Kiyone's direction, causing the detective to let out a scream, clutching at her head. "Although I'm grateful for the reminder about that pirate woman Ryoko. She was always trouble and she hasn't changed, thinking she could quiz Sakuya and cast aspersions about her across the court. I'll have to see to her too, when I've done playing with you."

"*Kiyone*!" Sasami yelled. "What did you do to her? Yugi! Stop this! Stop being horrible to people! I thought you were my friend — I thought we had a good time together. Why do you want to hurt everyone now? What did we ever do to you?"

"*Your father* counter-signed my mother's death warrant." Yugi's eyes glittered with ice as she dropped her focus from Kiyone, leaving the detective gasping. "*Your father* took my mother away from me and sent her into the depths of Jurai's sun. And then he took me, and locked me away in a little box, so that I would never come to Jurai again. I hate you all, you Juraians. I hate your family and I hate *you* most of all. Do you know why that is, Princess Sasami?"

Sasami gaped, struck speechless as she slowly shook her head.

"I hate you most of all because you refused to die all those years ago." Yugi's eyes glowed once more. Almost in slow motion, Ayeka raised her head from where she had stood silent, meeting Sasami's apprehensive gaze with a soulless ruby one of her own. "But we'll soon put that right. Ayeka failed me then. She won't fail me this time. And I know that you won't fight her, Sasami-kami-sama. I know that you love your sister more than anything in the world… and because of that, you won't summon your Goddess because you know that to stop me, you'll have to kill that sister. So it's over, now. You only have your pathetic Detective to protect you, and if I don't drive her mad with her memories before I'm finished toying with you, it won't be long before I do. Then she'll die too, so don't think she'll give you any help. It doesn't take me much effort to revive her worst nightmares and make her relive them again and again. The longer you live, Princess Sasami, the longer she'll suffer."

A mock-sympathetic expression touched her features, and to Sasami her parody of compassion was both empty and grotesque.

"It seems hopleless, doesn't it?" She murmured. "Your poor sister, and your dear, tormented friend. Can you stand it, if I torture one and fight you with the other? Are you strong enough? Or are you just a little girl after all, Tsunami? I wonder. I really do. Are you strong enough to fight back, or will you let your weak and feeble emotions win through?"

She shrugged her shoulders, as her expression became hard.

"It doesn't matter either way." She added coldly. "Because I'm going to finish what was begun, when Mother was still alive."

She turned to the Princess at her side and Ayeka's eyes flickered with a strange red light as white energy flared around her in a shimmering, ethereal aura of magic.

"Ayeka, you know what to do." She said firmly, and despite herself Sasami shrank back, terror and dismay in her crimson eyes as she realised the seriousness of Yugi's threat. "You may have been weak

when she was a baby, but you and I both know that you hate this brat and you never wanted her to be born. They might have taught you to forget — they may have made you think you loved her. But we know the truth, don't we? We know that you never wanted a sister. And now we're going to put it right, my little Empress in Waiting. We're going to take Jurai in your name, starting with its Goddess and then working our way through *all* those who betrayed my family."

She smiled, and the smile chilled Sasami right to the bone.

"And then Jurai will be mine." She whispered, flickering her hand in Sasami's direction. "With my puppet Queen, all will bow before the will of Yugi Kuroda. The time for action is *now*, Ayeka. Be true to yourself!"

She laughed, as Ayeka began to advance on the terrified Sasami.

"That's right, my friend. That's right." She agreed softly. "We've wished for it for so very long. Now is your chance. *Do it*!"

Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

“Are we heading back to your lab now?”

As they hurried across the landscape of Jurai towards the imposing structure of the Tenju tree palace, Seiryo cast his companion a quizzical look. “I’m guessing that you intend on informing Detective Makibi of your deduction as soon as possible — or are you going to attempt to track down Yugi herself?”

“I have a bad feeling that we’re going to be doing both of those at the same time.” Washu said grimly, her lips thinning as she contemplated what Tokimi had said.

“Yugi has been tracking Kiyone down, in search of that file. By now she must know that we have it — if she’s managed to sneak around the palace as Sakuya Kumashiro, who knows what she’s been able to discover?”

“You think that Yugi might even be at the lab now?” Seiryo’s eyes widened with alarm and Washu nodded her head curtly.

“It occurred.” She said briskly. “It’s also the one place Yugi hasn’t yet looked for her device. But she has been spending a lot of time in Sasami’s company, and Sasami would probably have told her that Kiyone and I are friends. She may even have mentioned that I’m something of a dabbler in all things technical. Yugi’s not a stupid enemy — I’m beginning to realise that leaving Kiyone on her own was a seriously bad idea on our part.”

“And Lady Sasami?”

“Sasami concerns me less at the moment.” Washu admitted. “If all else fails, she has a Goddess willing to rise up and protect her. Kiyone is just another officer of the law, however plucky and brave she can be. You know that as well as anyone — and her life may very well be in danger as we speak.”

“Then we need to find a quicker way.” A mixture of expressions crossed Seiryo’s face, as he contemplated Washu’s words. “I made myself a promise that I would do my best to protect her from any harm in all of this. I owe her that much if nothing else. Washu, I don’t like this magic you dabble in — I have no fondness for Kii magic at

all, after my experiences. But surely there's a way to use it to speed up our progress? Lady Ryoko teleports. Can you do this, also?"

"I can, but my aiming is a bit less exact than Ryoko's is, since Kihaku was destroyed." Washu looked startled. "We could end up in the right area, or some miles away, to be honest. I haven't managed to focus my coordinates quite properly yet — it'd be a calculated risk."

"One worth taking?"

"I don't know. If we failed, we'd take even longer to get to Kiyone." Washu said helplessly. "And then…"

"*Washu*!" Ryoko's voice cut across her mother's explanations, and the scientist stopped, turning to cast her daughter a rueful glance as the pirate ran across the grass towards them.

"Musume-chan, we were just talking about you." She said lightly. Ryoko frowned.

"Well, stop talking about me. This is more important. Listen. You were right about this Yugi girl using Ayeka as a weapon before. Haru didn't want to talk, but we prised it out of him and it turns out that when Sasami was a baby, Yugi convinced Ayeka to try and kill her. After that, Haru had Ayeka's memories wiped — but it happened then and it could happen again now."

"Where *is* Lady Ayeka?" Seiryo looked anxious, and Ryoko shrugged.

"I hoped you'd seen her." She admitted. "She took off on me, and I know she went looking for Sasami. But in her current state of mind — what that jerk Haru said really upset her, and she was pretty shook up. I don't think she should be flying free at the moment, but I haven't been able to find her."

She pursed her lips.

"What about you? What did Tokimi tell you?"

"Just that this girl we've been after is the child masquerading as Sakuya Kumashiro." Washu said grimly, and Ryoko's eyes narrowed.

"I *knew* that little bitch was up to something. I knew there was something wrong about her." She muttered, clenching her fists. "And that explains why Ayeka went for me, too. I pretty much confronted the brat about her managing to survive the Sumire massacre face to face… I guess she decided I was a threat."

"Not the most discreet mode of attack you ever chose, but at least

you're strong enough to fight off a determined Princess." Washu sighed. "Ryoko, there's a pretty good possibility that Yugi might know about our work with that file, now. If she's been Sakuya, she's been with Sasami. And Sasami may have told her that I tinker with gadgetry. The lab is one place the girl hasn't yet looked for Kiyone's evidence. I may be way off base, but Kiyone is on her own there right at the moment. And if I am right, I don't like her odds. Sasami at least has Tsunami's protection. Kiyone has none of that — not even her Galaxy Police arsenal."

Ryoko's eyes glittered with anger, and she nodded her head.

"Then why are we standing around here?" She demanded. "Let's go already!"

"I have a better idea." Washu shook her head. "Ryoko, your teleportation is strong these days, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I thought you could…"

"Not as accurately as you." Washu admitted, her expression becoming rueful as she took in the surprised look on her daughter's face. "Yes, I know, but now's not the time to gloat. Kihaku's destruction meant I had to relearn a lot, and this is still something I'm struggling with getting right every time. You, on the other hand, travel almost as easily as you do breathe. Do you think you're strong enough to take Seiryo-sama and I with you, if you were to go there now?"

"Strong enough?" Ryoko echoed, then she snorted. "You are kidding me, right? Taking one person is no effort at all. Taking two is a piece of cake. You forget that since I merged with Tsunami's Dark Heart, my magic has been more powerful all around."

She held out her hands, eying Seiryo thoughtfully for a moment as he hesitated.

"Well?" She demanded. "Did you want to help or didn't you? Would've thought that you owed it Kiyone if nothing else — or are Lords of Jurai cowards as well as would-be murderers?"

"I'm neither one." Seiryo said quietly, grasping her fingers tightly and sending her a dark look. "I just wondered if you *would* take me, considering you told my sister to keep me away from Detective Makibi while she was here."

"Right now I don't think we can be choosy." Washu said frankly. She slipped her hand into her companion's, nodding in Ryoko's direction. "Whenever you're ready, Ryoko-chan. Whatever we're going

into, it has to be better to do it than to stand around and wait."

"My sentiments exactly." Ryoko said simply, tightening her grip on both Seiryo and the scientist as she did so. "Hang on tight. I don't want to lose bits of anyone in mid-transfer."

Before either Washu or her companion could retort, the world blurred and spun around them, colours and lights flickering and dancing in a random enough way to make anyone dizzy. Almost as soon as it began, however, it was over, and as Washu opened her eyes, she realised that they had not just appeared in the middle of the computer lab.

They were in the middle of a confrontation.

For a moment nothing seemed to register, as Washu's dizzy brain struggled to make sense of the situation. Then, as her brain fug cleared, she realised that her worst fears had been realised. Kiyone was curled up on the ground, tears rolling down her cheeks as she struggled against some unseen enemy. Soft whispers and murmurs came from her lips, but even though her friend was in distress, Washu found she could not focus her attention on the detective's plight. Not far from where her friend lay, Sasami was backed up against the lab wall, eyes big with terror as a dark-clad figure — stiff and purposeful in her movements but still recognisable as the Crown Princess — advanced on her, the white energy of Jurai's sacred power flickering around her like an aura. In the furthest corner of the lab was the overseer of the whole business, amusement and derision on her childlike face as she settled herself to watch the show. As she laid eyes on this interloper, Washu felt a cold, dark chill sweep through her body and at once understood Tokimi's blind terror.

"Yugi Kuroda." She murmured.

"Well, so we have more visitors, do we?" Yugi seemed more entertained than put out by their arrival. "I didn't realise so many people wanted to come and witness the demise of a divine Princess."

As she spoke, Ayeka's hands came together in a flare of white light and Sasami let out a shriek, diving beneath the computer desk and peering out with wide, uncertain eyes.

"You little worm." Ryoko's sabre flared into life between her fingers as she took a step or two towards her foe. "You were a brat when you were younger and you haven't changed a bit. Let Ayeka go — stop using her to do your dirty work for you and fight your own battles!"

"Like this, Ryoko?" Yugi raised an eyebrow, flicking her hand in the

pirate's direction and a thick, sweeping wave of psychic energy flooded out across the chamber, knocking Ryoko clean off her feet. She fell heavily, but was soon scrambling up again, dusting herself down as she glowered at her enemy.

"That was a low blow." She muttered. "What do you want, anyway?"

"To kill people." Yugi said pleasantly. "Starting with Tsunami, and working my way down. You're on my list, Ryoko, but you'll have to wait your turn. And that pitiful detective — she'll be begging to die by the time I'm through with her."

"Detective Makibi!"

Seiryo hastened down onto the floor beside the struggling Detective, but Kiyone pushed him away, burying her head in her hands. Yugi chuckled, tut-tutting under her breath.

"She doesn't like you very much, Lord Tennan." She said softly, her voice eerie and echoing in the vast, high-ceilinged chamber. "Why would she want your assistance, when all she sees is you, over and over again? In her mind, she's back aboard that wretched spaceship of hers. In her mind, you're still there, taking her lifebeat away from her. She won't last very long. If her fear doesn't kill her, madness and desperation soon will."

Seiryo stared at the interloper for a moment, then rage glittered in his expression as he pulled his sword from his belt, flaring the blade into life.

"Let her go." He exclaimed. "Stop hurting her like that! She's been through enough already!"

"What do you imagine you can do with your little toy, Lord of Jurai?" Yugi smirked, raising her hand and Seiryo's weapon flitted out of his grip, wheeling around on an invisible axis until the blade pointed back at his own throat. "Do you understand what happens to people who draw swords on Yugi, now? They don't usually come out top in the encounter. Do you think that you will fare any better than the others did?"

"*Seiryo*!"

Washu let out an exclamation, as the nobleman attempted to duck the sword's parry. It moved more quickly than he could, however, and just as Washu thought her newest ally was about to be impaled, a chunk of electrical lab equipment came flying through the air, knocking the blade clattering across the floor. Washu swung around in

surprise, her eyes widening as she realised who had thrown it.

"Kiyone?" She murmured, then. "Are you all right?"

"Just… do something… about *her*." Sweat beaded on the detective's brow, but she sent the scientist a determined look, flinging her arm in the direction of Yugi. "Before she… does something… to Sasami."

"Seiryo, take Kiyone and get her out of here." Ryoko's fingers were already flaring once more with lighting energy, and Seiryo opened his mouth to protest, but Kiyone gripped at his wrist.

"We can't help them." She murmured. "And I can't k… keep fighting this."

"You *want* my help?" Seiryo stared at her. Kiyone offered him a faint smile.

"The you in my head isn't real." She whispered. "You wanted to make amends? Do it now."

Determination crossed Seiryo's expression and as Washu threw up a forcefield between Yugi and the door, the nobleman scooped the stricken detective up in his arms, holding her tightly as he made a dash for the laboratory exit. Yugi sought to block their path, but Washu's forcefield repelled her magic and she let out a cry of annoyance as they disappeared from her range, eyes glowing with an evil aqua light as she wheeled on the cause of her frustration.

"You are some kind of demon, blocking my magic with dark arts of your own." She said blackly, bearing down on Washu as she did so. "Ayeka, finish that brat of a Princess! Then you can help me uphold Juraian law and order… you can help me dispose of a true monster in your planet's midst."

Ayeka's blank eyes glittered with an evil red light as she pulled Sasami roughly from her hiding place, holding her tightly in her grip as she put a hand towards the girl's throat. Tears flooded down Sasami's cheeks as she struggled and fought against her sister's grasp, but it was to no avail.

"Ayeka! Ayeka-oneechan, please! Please snap out of it!" She begged. "Please let me go… you don't want to do this. *You don't want to hurt me*!"

"I'm afraid you're mistaken. The truth is that she's *always* wanted to hurt you, Sasami-*chan*." Yugi told her cruelly. "The affection you think you share — *that* is the false emotion. All I am doing is making Ayeka act on her true impulses. She hated you then and she hates you now.

This is her will, so you cannot break it."

"Ayeka is *not* a psychopath, unlike some people I could mention." Ryoko launched herself into the air, sending a glittering forcefield up around herself as she prepared for a new assault on their diminutive opponent. "You had the nerve to call me a demon when we were younger, and you've just insulted my mother with the same terminology. Did you look in a mirror yourself at all, recently? Because if you want to know what a demon really looks like, I think you'll find it there!"

"Demon? No." Yugi chuckled, shaking her head. "I'm a survivor, Ryoko. I take what I can and I make the most of it."

"How interesting." Washu said quietly. "To hear a child boast about things she really doesn't understand."

"I am *not* a child!" Rage flared in Yugi's eyes and her golden hair flitted out around her like a halo as she was engulfed in bluish light. "I will kill you and all those you care about — then you will see what kind of opponent I truly am!"

"Well, if we're dead, we'll have trouble doing that." Ryoko said grimly. "Make Ayeka let Sasami go and then we'll see who really does have the strongest magic. You, or us. But using someone else to fight your battles is weak. It's the actions of a coward… no wonder Washu calls you a child."

"My tactics are none of your business." Yugi's eyes narrowed until they were near slits. "Ayeka, enough of this. End it. Now."

Ayeka's fingers closed around Sasami's throat, and Ryoko let out a yell, diving towards the Princess in an attempt to stop her. A glowing white shield blocked her way, however, and she was sent flying backwards once more, helpless as Ayeka's grip grew ever firmer and Sasami's struggles began to weaken.

"Sasami is just a child!" Rage flooded Washu's heart. "You seek to kill innocents, because you are scared of what truly good people can do! Ryoko is right — you use others as your puppets instead of carrying out your convictions yourself. You are pathetic, Yugi Kuroda. Truly pathetic."

"We'll see." Yugi said softly. "Noone has yet managed to slay Tsunami-kami-sama, but noone else has realised that Tsunami has a weakness. That weakness is love. Love for a sister who never really wanted her, anyway. So many times I had to listen to Ayeka complain about the new baby, and how it had disrupted her happy, settled life.

Well, I thought, why not do something about it?"

She smiled, but it was a cold, chilling smile and Washu saw a glimmer of insanity lurking in the depths of the girl's frozen eyes.

"When my mother discovered that Sasami-sama was truly the divine one born again, I knew that everything would come together. Except for one small thing — Ayeka failed. She was seen, and her meddling family took action against both mother and I for seeking to make Jurai a better place to live in. We were punished. And that creature — that so called Goddess — was allowed to grow and live."

"How exactly did you seek to make Jurai better, by making a child kill another child?" Washu demanded, her gaze flitting across to where Sasami appeared to have lost consciousness. "What, exactly, would be better about a world in which sister slays sister?"

"Jurai is a closed, evil world where nobody is allowed to breathe out of place. All because of *her*, the dark spirit who controls them all with her will." Yugi spat back, gesturing in Sasami's direction. "Ryoko should know what I speak of. This world hates difference. It hates innovation. My mother was killed because she sought to think beyond her boundaries as a foreign born wife and mother. And I was exiled because they did not understand. All I did was make Ayeka follow through on her true will — but a child of Tsunami's line can never be in the wrong."

There was bitterness in her tones, and Ryoko bit her lip, bringing her hands together to form a ball of light.

"If you don't like Jurai, do what I did." She said flatly. "Leave it. Make your own life. Noone has to live by Jurai's rules unless they choose to. And they certainly don't have to kill people over it. Your mother deserved to be frittered and you deserve the same thing. Let Sasami and Ayeka go, before I decide to do the honours myself."

"Sasami is dead." Yugi said simply. "There is noone there to let go. Ayeka has finally fulfilled her task, and stolen her sister's life."

"No, she hasn't." Washu said darkly. "You underestimate Tsunami, Yugi. She has put too much into Sasami to let her die so easily."

Before Yugi could respond, a bright white pulse flared out from Sasami's still form, illuminating the chamber and dazzling all of its occupants for a moment in its ray. Then, as the light faded, Washu could make out Sasami's form, floating up out of Ayeka's grasp and hovering a foot or two above the ground, still bathed in an unearthly glow. As she slowly opened her eyes, the light began to dim, and she

reached out glittering, ethereal fingers to touch the still-transfixed Ayeka's cheek, placing both hands gently against her sister's skin. Ayeka let out a wild cry and then crumpled, falling to the floor in a dead faint as Sasami relinquished her grip.

"It's not possible!" Yugi's eyes were wide with disbelief. "Sasami was dead! Sasami was…"

"But *Tsunami* was not." Sasami turned, and Washu knew that it was not the child who spoke, but the Goddess who once more had control of her body. "And I will protect this form so long as she shields me within her. You seek to destroy what you do not understand. This world is not for you. Return to your cell… leave these people and leave Jurai in peace."

"Never." Yugi's eyes narrowed, and she flexed her fingers, her own blueish aura growing stronger with every second as venom glittered in her expression. "I've come far too far to stop now — as Sasami or Tsunami, I *will* destroy you. Maybe Ayeka was useless, after all. I didn't realise you had the nerve to fight those you loved. Maybe Tsunami is colder than Sasami was — either way, I shall not leave this place until I kill you. And if Ayeka will not kill you on my behalf, then *I* shall kill her and put the blame on your head, instead."

She held out her hands, bathing Ayeka in her magic as she forcibly lifted the prone form of the Princess upwards. Ayeka did not stir, but as she reached the highest-most point in the chamber, Yugi let go of her hold, sending the girl tumbling headlong back towards the polished stone floor below.

"*Ayeka*!"

Seeing her sister in such mortal danger seemed to wake Sasami and the light of the Goddess faded from around her as she let out a panicked shriek, gripping hold of the table for support as she registered Ayeka's fall. "Someone do something. *Someone do something*!"

"On it!" Ryoko flickered out of view, re-materialising beneath the Princess and catching her in her arms just in time. She sent Yugi a triumphant look, and Yugi narrowed her gaze, preparing herself for another flare of magic.

"You next, Ryoko… don't look so smug, you won't get away from me that easily." She said darkly, and Ryoko darted out of the way, setting Ayeka down on the floor as she sought to dodge the bevy of psychic blasts that came flying in her direction. At length one made contact with her body, and she let out a scream, falling headlong to

the ground with a bump as she struggled to right herself once more. Even from where she stood, Washu could see that her daughter was dazed and disorientated by her fall, and as Yugi advanced on the stricken pirate, something inside of her snapped. She narrowed her gaze, flexing her own fingers as she summoned all of her Kii magic to the forefront of her mind.

"*Enough*!" She exclaimed, lifting herself off the ground as her body was illuminated by a soft, amber haze. "Leave my daughter alone, or else you'll regret it, Yugi! I mean it. *Leave Ryoko alone*!"

"Well, so someone was willing to claim responsibility for you after all, Ryoko." Yugi seemed amused, reaching out to touch Ryoko as the pirate flinched back away from her.

"I can't use my magic — she's stopping me somehow!" She exclaimed, and Washu nodded her head, the haze around her growing brighter and brighter as she drew more and more of her energy into one focused location. Then she turned, meeting Yugi's gaze with a black one of her own.

"You think I am a demon, but I am something else. Something older." She said softly. "Like my sister, who sees you as you really are, I see through to your black heart and I know that the true demon here is you, Yugi. And you might not know of the Kii — you might not even believe we still exist. But believe me, we do."

"I'm supposed to care?" Yugi turned away from Ryoko, facing Washu head on. "Where you come from is not my concern. It doesn't matter where someone is born, after all. They don't need anything but earth in which to bury their bodies."

"We'll see." Washu said quietly. "I've been around a long time, and more people have tried to destroy me than I care to count. None have succeeded. Do you think you can? Let's find out. How strong are you really, Yugi? What black arts can you wield against the last of the Kii Priestesses?"

"*Washu*?" Ryoko's eyes became big with confusion, but Washu paid her no attention, bringing her hands together to protect herself as Yugi sent a volley of blasts in her direction. She shook her head, a slight smile touching her lips.

"Try harder." She said quietly. "If you can kill me, then you win. Isn't that how it works? You've knocked back everyone else. Surely you can take out one aging scientist, Yugi? Or doesn't your power work against Kii magic?"

“I don’t care about Kii magic.” Yugi snapped. “You’ll die just as surely as everyone else will, but I’ll make it slow and nasty, just because you’re starting to annoy me.”

“Well, forgive me then.” Washu said softly, and a strange light glittered in her green eyes. “I prefer to be swift and clean.”

With that she closed her eyes, drawing on her memory of the Kii texts as she murmured something in her native tongue. As the sensation grew and swelled within her, she found herself helpless to contain it, and as she grasped her hands tightly together, wielding them in Yugi’s direction, a wave of amber energy rocketed out around the room, engulfing Yugi in its haze and trapping her deep within its eerie glow. Yugi let out a shriek as her own blue aura faded, and Washu dropped to the ground, biting her lip as her surroundings swirled and span around her.

“Washu, what the hell was that?” Ryoko scrambled to her feet, grasping at her mother’s hand as she did so. “Are you all right? What kind of magic have you been hiding from me, anyway?”

“The magic of the Priests of Kihaku for exorcising evil spirits.” Washu managed, sending her daughter a rueful grimace. “It seems I’ve become a witch at last, Ryoko… who would have thought it?”

“But what do we do with her now? Now she’s trapped?” Sasami asked hesitantly from her position at Ayeka’s side, and Washu turned, sending the Princess a gentle smile.

“Are you all right, Sasami?”

“Yes… I think so. But Ayeka’s still unconscious.” Sasami nodded. “Tsunami saved me, didn’t she? She protected me like she said she would?”

“She did.” Washu nodded. “But Tsunami knows that using the full thrust of her power could be destructive to universes, not just single demons. This is our situation to resolve now, Sasami. You take care of Ayeka. Leave Yugi in our hands.”

Slowly she advanced on the imprisoned girl, ignoring the venomous hatred that glittered in Yugi’s aqua eyes as she continued to struggle and fight against the magical restraints. Gently she poked at the light, then she smiled.

“Well, and I guess I underestimated this superstitious nonsense of Father’s for far too long. That’s quite a useful thing to know.” She observed off-handedly. “I must remember it the next time we have some unspeakable evil to fight off — it might even save us time.”

“I didn’t think you *knew* any Kii spells.” Ryoko eyed her mother suspiciously. “And I didn’t think you called yourself Priestess of Kihaku!”

“I don’t and I’m not, not really. But all that reading and researching I did, trying to find a cure for Tokimi also unlocked various other Kii secrets and mysteries.” Washu said simply. “When all is said and done, that magic is still mine to wield, isn’t it? I might not have been ordained Priestess of Kihaku and there is no Kihaku to enslave my spirit. But I am a Hakubi, so these things are in my blood.”

She eyed her companion pensively.

“Yours too, now I come to think of it. *Your* magic is a meshing of two different lines, but your assimilation with the Dark Heart seems to have biased it towards the Juraian and not towards the Kii. You were far too helpless against Yugi’s magic for my liking — you need to harness *all* aspects of your power, rather than just relying on what comes most easily to you.”

She tilted her head on one side, considering.

“Maybe I’ll have to try and teach you some of these things, also. You never know when it might come in handy… you seem to know a lot more negative souls than I do.”

“So what happens to her now? Back in her little box, sealed up for all eternity again?” Ryoko asked. Washu poked at the light haze once more, then frowned, shaking her head.

“And what about the next time the capsule is released?” She asked softly. “The next time she comes to Jurai, to hurt Ayeka and Sasami and terrorise innocent people? No, Ryoko… I don’t think that will work. Not this time.”

“Then what are you going to do with her?” Ryoko looked alarmed. “Are you going to *kill* her?”

Washu was silent for a moment, then she shook her head.

“No.” She said quietly. “I’m going to seal her up so that she can’t possibly get out without help. And then I’m going to hand her over to the Judicial system of Jurai. Let them handle her however they see fit. Angry as she made me, I’m not going to have her blood on my hands.”

“She looks kind of pitiful, all locked up like that.” Ryoko mused. “You know that nutcase Haru will probably jettison her into the sun, just like her mother.”

“Then that will be Jurai’s choice to make. Not ours.” Washu offered

her daughter a faint smile. “The crimes are against Jurai, after all.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Ryoko acknowledged, turning towards Ayeka and Sasami as she did so. “And Ayeka? Will she be all right, now?”

“I think Tsunami took care of Ayeka’s possession, but she’ll probably be a bit battered and bruised, when she comes to.” Washu said honestly. “She should probably go to the Infirmary. After all…”

Before she could finish her sentence, the doors of the lab burst open and Azaka, followed by Kamidake and a bevy of palace military flooded into the chamber, stopping dead when they registered the scene before them. Now the pressure was off, Sasami burst into tears once more, flinging herself on a startled Kamidake, who stared at her, then hugged her tightly, assuring her that everything would now be all right. As Azaka approached the still form of the Crown Princess, lifting her gently in his arms, Seiryo stepped into the room, offering Washu a droll smile.

“You’ve been busy, then.” He remarked, nodding in the direction of the imprisoned Yugi. “Kii magic?”

“Kii magic.” Washu agreed. She stifled a yawn. “And I’m beat. But I guess there are advantages to having spells dating back before common records. How can you fight something if you don’t understand it? Yugi had no defence against my magic because she never knew it even existed.”

“Lady Ayeka?”

“She’ll be all right. Stunned, but Tsunami took care of that.” Washu leant back against the remains of one of her computer units. “You know, sending the palace guard wasn’t necessarily the best move. It could have been dangerous for them.”

“I didn’t, exactly.” Seiryo pursed his lips. “I saw Detective Makibi into safe hands — once away from here, Yugi’s hold over her seemed to break and she’ll be fine, I think. A little shaken, but she is brave enough to overcome it.”

He shrugged.

“I suppose Yugi had more on her mind than bothering about one detective’s mental state. As for the military intervention, I told Azaka and Kamidake what had happened, with the intention of reporting the incident to my Emperor. However, Kamidake’s reaction when he heard Lady Sasami was under threat was immediate. The next thing I knew, both Knights of Jurai had rounded up a miniature army and

descended in this direction. I thought I'd better follow, just in case."

"I see." Washu smiled, casting a glance at Kamidake and the Princess who he was still gently consoling. "Yes, that does make sense."

Seiryo's eyes narrowed, following her gaze, and Washu could tell he was reasoning things out for himself. At length he returned her smile.

"Ah. Well, that makes it a little clearer." He remarked off-handedly. "And Yugi?"

"Lord Haru and Jurai's military are welcome to her." Washu shrugged her shoulders. "I've had quite enough of that particular demon for one lifetime!"

"*They never have time for me any more.*"

The young girl settled herself more comfortably on the expansive window seat, resting her head against the thick velveteen curtains as she let out a heavy sigh. Outside the window, the sun had only just begun its morning ascent in the Juraian sky, but even the bright colours of the early sunrise were not enough to distract the young Princess from her gloom.

"*Yugi-oneechan, why do people have babies anyway? I mean, aren't I good enough on my own? Why do they need to have any more? Don't they want me any more?*"

"*New babies, huh?*" *Her companion pulled a face, scrambling up beside her.* "*My father wanted to have other children, when I was born. But then he died, and so Mother never did. I'm glad. I wouldn't want to share… parents aren't there to be shared, after all. Your mother and father are crazy, Ayeka-chan. Babies just cry and scream and throw up. That's what my mother said. They're no use for anything.*"

"*Then why does everyone crowd around her so much?*" *Ayeka's ruby eyes glittered with tears and she bit down hard on her lip, determined not to let herself cry.* "*If she can't even do anything, why does everyone think she's so special?*"

She frowned, folding her arms across her chest.

"*It's not fair.*" *She added bitterly.* "*It's just because she looks like Mother. They like her better, all because of that. Everyone always says how beautiful Mother is, and now Sasami will look like her and be beautiful and everyone will forget that I even exist. They might even want to get rid of me… they might not want me to be Princess any more!*"

"Isn't that illegal, or something?" Yugi opened her aqua eyes wide with surprise, and Ayeka shrugged.

"My Grandfather makes the laws." She said flatly. "And he doesn't like me. He's a scary man who hates my father. He might like Sasami too, because she looks like Mother and he doesn't hate Mother. So they might want her to be Queen one day instead of me. What can I do about it, Yugi? I want to make her go away. How can I make her go away?"

"Maybe you could do magic on her." Yugi's eyes narrowed, a thoughtful smile touching her lips. "You know that your family have special magic. Why don't you put a spell on the baby? You could make her grow fangs or a beard or something. Then she wouldn't be pretty like Misaki-sama any more and people wouldn't like her."

"I can't do magic yet." Ayeka kicked out in frustration against the wood of the window-seat. "I'm not old enough. I don't know how."

"Are you sure?" Yugi looked doubtful. "You could try. We could go to the nursery, and you could try and see if it worked. Noone would know, if it didn't."

"What if I'm caught?"

"You said they don't notice you're there at the moment." Yugi reminded her. "But I'll come with you. Then if anyone comes, I'll distract them. I'll tell them that I'm ill, or something. Then they won't bother about what you're doing… they'll be concentrating on me."

"That is a good idea!" Ayeka's ruby eyes lit up with hope at this point. "And if Sasami doesn't look like Mother any more, then things might go back to how they were."

"So shall we go?" Yugi asked. Ayeka nodded, slipping down off the ledge and holding her hand out to her friend.

"Yes. Come on, Yugi-neechan. Let's go."

"What kind of spell are you going to put on her?" As they walked through the hallways of the royal palace, Yugi cast her companion a sidelong glance. Ayeka frowned.

"I don't know." She admitted. "Uncle doesn't seem to use spells, when he does his magic. He seems to… well, he just makes light come from his hands and stuff. So I guess I'll just try and do that… somehow."

Yugi giggled.

"You could make her look like the demon girl." She suggested, nudging her friend as she caught sight of a familiar figure curled up on the roof

beams of one of the off-shooting corridors, idly flicking through a comic book. "Then noone would want to go near her."

Ayeka glanced up, attracting the child's attention as she did so, and two golden eyes glowered down at her, anger and defiance in their depths.

"Did you want something, Princess Stuck Up?" She demanded. Ayeka frowned, putting her hands on her hips.

"Go away, Ryoko." She said frankly. "We're busy. Leave us alone."

"You leave me alone! I was here first!"

"I keep telling you she's a demon, Ayeka-chan." Yugi grimaced in her friend's direction. "What kind of normal person sits on roof beams to read?"

Ayeka cast Ryoko another hesitant glance, and Ryoko raised her hand, light flickering from the ends of her fingers.

"Shut your face, Yugi Kuroda." She said darkly. "Else I'll blast you and set your hair on fire again."

Yugi sent an unpleasant glare back towards her foe.

"Just try it." She murmured, and Ayeka shot her friend an apprehensive glance.

"Don't fight with her. Father says we're to ignore her and leave her to her own devices." She said firmly, grabbing Yugi by the hand. "If she is a demon, we're not to have anything to do with her. She's too weird, anyway. And we have more important things to do."

"True." Yugi nodded her head, and Ryoko poked out her tongue in return.

"Yeah, get lost, the both of you. Stuck up, stupid idiots." She shot back.

"Why did your Uncle ever bring that thing to Jurai, anyway?" Yugi wondered, as they drew closer to the nursery. Ayeka shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know. Uncle is strange, sometimes." She admitted. "But I wish he hadn't. She's strange — she scares me sometimes. And Father says she probably is some kind of demon, with all those odd things she can do. He doesn't want me to speak to her if I can help it — I think he plans on getting her sent away."

"Couldn't come soon enough." Yugi muttered. "But let's forget about Ryoko. What about Princess Sasami? Are you ready?"

"I guess so." Ayeka put a hand on the nursery door, then hesitated. "But

what if I can't think of any magic when we're there?"

Yugi smiled, holding out her hand to take her friend's fingers in hers. She tilted her head, humour dancing in her aqua eyes.

"It's all right, Ayeka, because I have magic too." She murmured. "And I'm going to help you make sure that nobody ignores you for Sasami-chan ever ever again."

"Ayeka?"

As the pictures faded, Ayeka opened her eyes, blinking as she fought to bring her surroundings into focus. For a moment she could not imagine where she was, and then, as she met the concerned gaze of her husband, more recent memories overwhelmed her and she let out a heavy sigh, closing her eyes once more. Suddenly her brain felt like someone had poured lead inside of it, as she struggled to put everything into its proper place.

"Ayeka, look at me. Please." There was genuine fear in Takeru's voice and despite how heavy her head felt, Ayeka forced her eyes open once more, her fingers fumbling for his across the bedcovers as if in search of comfort.

"Takeru." She whispered, then, "Where am I?"

"The Infirmary, at the palace, of course." Takeru looked surprised. "Don't you remember?"

"I… I don't know." Ayeka struggled into a more upright position. "I was just… was I dreaming? I was remembering something… Yugi. What happened to Yugi?"

"Yugi is safely in Juraian custody and she won't be able to hurt you again." Takeru squeezed her hand gently. "I promise, Ayeka, it's over. All of it. For good this time."

Ayeka sank back against her pillows, biting her lip.

"Is Sasami…?"

"Sasami is fine also."

"I didn't hurt her? In my dream…"

"No, Ayeka. Sasami is all right, I promise." Takeru shook his head. "Yugi was stopped before she could make you… and Tsunami protected you both, in the end. You and Sasami. Tsunami broke the spell over you… Washu thinks that she probably healed whatever weakness Yugi was able to use to manipulate you, when she did that. So it's really all right. You just need to rest and recover and

everything will be fine."

Ayeka was silent for a moment, contemplating.

"I want to know exactly what happened." She said quietly. "Everything, Takeru. I know something did — I remember speaking to Father, and being with… with Ryoko. I remember her hugging me and telling me it didn't matter… although that seems so surreal it might have been a dream too. And then… then I don't know. A bunch of pictures. Flashes. Something. Memories, I think… but nothing coherent until I woke up here."

She swallowed hard.

"Father told me he'd had some of my memories suppressed. Memories about Sasami." She added, her voice barely above a whisper. "But maybe Tsunami healed that part of me too, Takeru. Because I think I… I think I remember other things that I didn't remember before. Things about… about not wanting a sister at all. *Bad* things."

Tears welled up in her eyes, and Takeru put a gentle finger to her cheek, shaking his head.

"Lord Haru has been beside himself ever since your confrontation earlier today." He said gently. "He told me what he told you — I've never seen a man more upset about a decision made so long ago. He knows that what he did was wrong, Ayeka, and he doesn't want you to doubt your feelings for Sasami because of that event. He erased Yugi's influence over you. He didn't make you love or hate your sister. You were small children and new babies often bring jealousy in older siblings, you know. It's normal. Yugi just manipulated that to make you do something you shouldn't. It wasn't your fault then, just as it isn't now."

"Maybe you're right." Ayeka acknowledged. She sighed, toying with the edges of the bedcovers as she contemplated his words. "But Takeru, honestly… I've never thought that there was a time Sasami and I weren't close. I helped her as she grew up, I taught her things… she looked up to me and I've always adored her. At least, I thought so. That there was a time when I didn't feel that way — well, having it suppressed just makes me doubt everything I do know. If I did resent her at first, then I guess I'll never know if that was me or Yugi, behind it. Instead of talking it out with me, Mother and Father locked it away where I couldn't reason it out for myself."

"Are you angry with them, Ayeka-chan?"

“Yes.” Ayeka admitted. “At the moment, very angry. And hurt. But most of all, frightened. What must Sasami think of me now, Takeru? Now she knows that her big sister once tried to kill her.”

She bit down hard on her lip, tasting blood.

“Even though you have avoided my question about the details, I know I threatened her again today.” She added softly. “The memory isn’t there, but I can tell by the look on your face. Yugi made me attack her, didn’t she? Even if she didn’t succeed? She made me try and take Sasami’s life, just like when we were children.”

Takeru sighed, dropping his gaze.

“Yes. I’m afraid she did.” He agreed reluctantly. “But Sasami is unhurt from the encounter, Ayeka. Kiyone-san, Washu-sama and Ryoko-san seem to have been able to intervene in the nick of time, and Tsunami always watches over your sister.”

He hesitated, then,

“I understand from Kamidake that Lord Tennan also played a role in this.” He added. “It would seem his recent preoccupation and secrecy has been in the pursuit of the demon Yugi… he has been working in Jurai’s favour all this time.”

“He was with Washu, when we talked in her lab, before I confronted Father.” Ayeka nodded. “He was worried about Lady Suki and Tokimi, and their safety while all this was going on. Like before, Takeru, I guess he acted with the protection of his family in mind.”

She hesitated, then,

“Do you think we have misjudged the man, then?”

“I’m hating the thought of it, but maybe.”

“Well, as it stands, I am little better than he is.” Ayeka eyed her hands bitterly. “My nails scratched blood from Ryoko’s skin, and who knows what I did to Sasami while under Yugi’s lure. Seiryo-sama attacked you and Kiyone, whilst under the influence of dark magic. In light of that, I am a worse sinner than he is. I have attacked three people and one divine tree with a view to ending their lives.”

“Ayeka…”

“No.” Ayeka shook her head. “If I persist in thinking Seiryo guilty and suspicious, I must think the same of myself. And if I want forgiveness for my actions, I must be able to forgive his.”

She sighed.

“And so I will do so.” She added. “And hope that people will be less judgemental of me than I have been of him and his actions.”

“Ayeka-chan?”

Haru’s voice from the doorway of the small, brightly lit chamber prevented Takeru from responding, and both Princess and Prince Consort turned to see Azusa’s right hand man watching them, guilt and anguish mingled in his expression as he surveyed his eldest child. Takeru got to his feet immediately, stepping back from the bed and Haru shot him a grateful look, faltering and then taking the seat at his daughter’s side. Ayeka opened her mouth to prevent her husband from leaving, but Takeru had seen already the look in Haru’s eyes and had wisely slipped out of the room, shutting the door behind him with a soft click.

For a moment, father and daughter regarded one another in uncertain silence. Then Haru let out a heavy sigh, shaking his head.

“This is my fault, isn’t it?” He said at length. “Ryoko was right. By suppressing something inside of you, I’ve allowed history to repeat. You would never have been so vulnerable, had you known what had gone before.”

Ayeka did not answer straight away, then she met her father’s gaze with a sombre one of her own.

“You can’t learn from your mistakes if you don’t know what they are.” She said levelly, fighting to keep her voice even as she did so. “Daddy, you’ve lied to me. You and Mother both. I… I don’t know now if I can trust you on other things. Have you concealed from me other secrets? Other things you didn’t want to handle in my upbringing, locked away behind closed doors?”

“No.” Haru shook his head, and the pain in his expression almost made Ayeka break down and cry. “Ayeka, we did it that one time. But it was too distressing — for you and for us. Dr Kurashida advised us against repeating the procedure, and we both resolved that we wouldn’t take that tack again.”

“I really wanted to hurt Sasami that day, didn’t I?”

“Yugi made you do things that weren’t of your will.”

“No… she didn’t. Not entirely.” Ayeka looked troubled. “Tsunami protected Sasami but she also repaired my memory for me, when she intervened today. I remember the things that you made me forget, Daddy. I was jealous of Sasami, when she was first born. I didn’t understand anything about being a big sister. I had been the only

child for so long — and then there she was, this intruder in my life. I did want rid of her. That wasn't Yugi — that was me."

She sighed.

"I want to believe it was Yugi who made me attack her." She added. "But because of everything, I can't be sure. And because you made those memories go away, it makes me wonder if you doubted me, too. You said you didn't, but if it wasn't my fault, why did you seek to make me forget it?"

Haru eyed his hands guiltily.

"Your mother and I have disagreed about that for so long." He admitted miserably. "Misaki has always had the ultimate faith in you, Ayeka. She blamed Yugi for it all — even for your feelings of envy as well as your outbursts and bad tempered behaviour."

"But you didn't, did you?" Ayeka stared at her father in dismay. "You wondered if I… if I could be capable!"

"Not of trying to kill your sister. That was beyond you, my child, and I always knew that." Haru folded his hands together absently as he spoke, and Ayeka could see how shaken her father really was. "But of your envy, yes. And your ability to behave like a spoiled only child… that too. I'm sorry for having harboured that suspicion, Ayeka-chan. I know that now you love your sister like nothing else. But there have been bad blood conflicts between members of Jurai's royal family in so many generations. Knowing the nature of Jurai's Princes, I did wonder about you and whether you did, secretly, wish your sister gone."

Ayeka sighed.

"I wanted to put a spell on her." She said slowly. "So that she wouldn't look like Mother, and everyone wouldn't fuss over how pretty she was."

Despite himself, a slight smile touched Haru's lips.

"Azusa once told me that he tried to send Aiko and I interstellar, when we were just tiny infants." He admitted. "He hated these tiny babies who'd replaced his mother and who spent all the time crying and demanding attention. So one day he decided he was going to send us to the colonies. He put us in one of the big transport boxes and told the guards on duty that it was a present for his pen friend. Fortunately Aiko decided to scream and yell, because otherwise we might just have been sent all that way."

Ayeka stared at him, and Haru spread his hands.

“Jealousy of younger siblings is natural.” He added. “I’m sorry that by making you forget yours, I’ve made it out to be something more sinister. I was a very frightened man, that’s the truth of it, and I took that fear out on a lot of people. My family were so precious to me that I couldn’t imagine any of them having to live with the knowledge of something like that. So I took steps. They were the wrong ones — I realise that now. But I did it because I loved you. That’s all.”

“I suppose love does make you do funny things.” Ayeka buried her head in her hands. “I am angry at you, Father. And I am angry at myself. But I am also afraid, too. What will Sasami make of all of this? Will she forgive me, after everything that’s happened? We’ve always been so close. At least, I thought we had.”

“You really have, Ayeka-chan.” Haru assured her. “Without the influence of Yugi, you and your sister grew up closer to one another than you might otherwise have been. Misaki took it upon herself to involve you more and more with Sasami, so that you felt involved, not pushed aside. Your mother is very upset about all of this and she’s angry at me too — she never wanted your memories erased at all. So if you want to be cross, my dear, be cross with me. This is my fault, not anyone else’s.”

Ayeka frowned, smoothing her bedcovers as she contemplated her father’s words.

“I need time to think about it all, really.” She admitted. “Father, I am angry at you for something else, too. Something else you told us, when we confronted you about Yugi and the past. About the way you made me see Ryoko, when we were both little girls.”

Haru bit his lip, nodding his head.

“I thought that might come up.” He admitted unwillingly. “Ryoko was always a frightening, rebellious, boisterous child. She was bad company for you, even if I was overly cautious about her nature. I did encourage you to believe her dangerous, because with her magic so out of hand, she might well have been. And she could have taught you bad habits and manners along the way, had you associated with her. Your mother once had to forcibly part you as tiny infants, fighting in the flower fields of one of our planets, and I did not want the future Queen of Jurai to grow up fist-fighting all comers.”

“Perhaps.” Ayeka acknowledged. “But Father, Ryoko is descended from Aunt Aiko. You loved her, and Uncle says that Ryoko is very like her. What would Aunt Aiko have wanted, if she’d known about

Ryoko? Would she have been happy, that you cast her granddaughter out?"

Dismay flickered across Haru's expression, and he sighed.

"Another thing I wrestle with." He admitted. "No, probably she would not. But your Aunt was murdered and most likely at the hands of Ryoko's father. What magic that girl has in her, I don't know. I still believe that she could be dangerous, if pushed too far in the wrong direction. She has committed a multitude of crimes, Ayeka. She has shown her true nature from the start. Even if demon was too strong a word for her — she did not belong here on Jurai and Azusa should never have brought her here."

"I disagree." Ayeka said quietly, and Haru stared at her in surprise. "Are Jurai's doors always open to those who need help? Or do we only choose those people we like on sight — those people we can maybe use in the future as pawns and weapons of our own? Ryoko has many flaws, Father. And she has committed many crimes with very little remorse. But then again, I wonder, how many of those crimes might have been prevented if this planet had truly done its job and taken proper care of her when she needed it."

"Ayeka, I…"

"When I am Empress, that won't be allowed to happen." Ayeka held up her hand, determination in her gaze. "You might hate Ryoko for being a pirate, but you helped drive her to become one, Father. What you do impacts on other people's lives, not just yours. Ryoko has not always been my ally but in recent years she has done many things with Jurai's benefit in mind."

She sighed.

"And more recently, she has proven to be a true friend and confidant to me, when I needed someone to talk to." She added. "Even though I attacked her under Yugi's spell, she still defended me in front of you — and comforted me when I needed that support. We are very different people, it is true, and perhaps we would never have established such a rapport as children. But you put a deliberate rift between us… you should have let us decide for ourselves if we hated one another."

"Are you saying I should have accepted that girl as Azusa wanted, as an official ward of Jurai and effectively a Princess in all but name?" Haru looked startled. Ayeka frowned.

"Ryoko *is* a Princess, by bloodline, even if she is illegitimate." She

said frankly. “And she will be even more of one, when she marries Lord Tenchi. So you’ll have to accept her, then, and so call her, unless you wish to insult the wife of the man who has so often come to Jurai’s rescue. Father, you can’t control everything and everyone around you… sometimes you need to step back and let them make their own decisions. And not everyone is bad because they are low-born or have foreign blood or heritage. Yugi grew up Juraian and she turned bad. Ryoko ran away from Jurai — and now I can see good in her I never did as a child.”

“Are you telling me this because you think I need the lesson, or because you intend to follow your own advice, musume-chan?” Haru asked softly, and Ayeka shrugged.

“I don’t know.” She admitted. “Perhaps we both need to learn it. Ryoko said I was bossy when I was in a position of power and I think I always have been controlling in some respects. But not everything is controllable, so I’m going to stop trying. I’m not going to be in the position one day when I choose to erase my child’s memories because he or she does something I don’t like. I don’t always feel ready for the responsibilities on my head, Father, and that might be because you protected me far too much when I was young. Without my visits to the Earth and my adventures through space, I might be a completely hopeless excuse for a Princess of Jurai… you can’t always protect me. Sometimes there are things I need to know, and do, and find out my own way. Otherwise I’ll never make a good Empress, no matter how good my bloodline is.”

She spread her hands.

“And in a sense, that goes for Sasami too, you know.”

“Meaning?”

“You decide that Sasami can’t visit the Council, nor speak to the Councillors on official matters such as the hearing of Lord Tennan.” Ayeka said quietly. “You decide that noone will marry or even *court* her till she is eighteen, without even asking her opinion on the subject. And even though you know she is Tsunami, you keep it hushed up around the court, as if it’s some terrible secret you hope will go away. You might make the same mistakes with her if you’re not careful… and Father, when Uncle is gone, and you also, I will need my sister as a strong ally in times of crisis.”

“You think that Sasami should have her own retinue, then?”

“I think that it’s time you considered the official revival of the Cult of Tsunami, and also that it’s time you asked Sasami to pick her own

retinue." Ayeka agreed frankly. "Not picked them for her… let her decide."

"Sasami barely knows any of Jurai's Council, let alone any of the other lesser nobility at court." Haru objected. "She is thirteen, Ayeka. Not eighteen. There is time yet."

"Perhaps, but time will run out." Ayeka said gravely. "She's *too* much a child in some respects. Let her see more of what it's like to be an adult Princess… she's halfway there already, and you smother her too much. Just as you did me. She needs to make her own decisions. If she wants to be a child, well, let her. But if she wants to come to Council meetings, or when she chooses to court a beau, let her do it in her own time. You need to trust her, Father. And you need to trust me, too."

Haru pursed his lips, nodding his head.

"I will take that on board, my Crown Princess." He said softly, affection in his gaze. "And I am sorry, for the mistakes I have made. But all parents make them, Ayeka-chan. We all do. And we learn from them and move on — such is life."

"Speaking of which, I want to see Sasami." Ayeka said quietly. "If she'll see me, Father, I want to see her."

"But…"

"Father."

Haru closed his eyes, rubbing his temples as he contemplated what to do. At length he raised his gaze to his eldest child's.

"Sasami was shaken by this afternoon's occurances, just as you were." He said softly. "I do not seek to keep you apart, only to let you both come to terms with events before you share confidences and work out what happened between you. Sasami came within an inch of her life once more, my daughter. She was very afraid, when Kamidake brought her to me. She'd cried herself into a fit of hysteria, and I decided that until she was calm once more, I would keep you apart. Please understand… whatever your feelings may have been once where she was concerned, to Sasami you have always been the big sister she adores."

"Is she… afraid of me?" Ayeka looked distressed. Haru hesitated, then shook his head.

"No. She loves you." He said softly, resting his hand gently on hers as he sought to comfort her. "That's what made her so upset. I will let

you see your sister, musume-chan, but right now I want you to rest. Sasami will come, when things are calmer. You have my word."

"All right." Ayeka sighed, biting her lip. "If she was really that upset, maybe… maybe you are right."

"Well, I hope I've been right in something." Haru said ruefully. He smiled, getting to his feet.

"Take a nap." He murmured. "I'll tell Takeru I've left you to sleep, and he won't disturb you."

"Thank you." Ayeka returned the smile with a faint one of her own, even as she settled down on her pillows. "And tell him something else, Father?"

"Yes?"

"Tell him that I was glad he was here, when I woke up. He was exactly who I needed to see and he said all the right things to comfort me."

Haru's smile broadened.

"Ah. Then yes, I see I have made *one* right decision where you were concerned, haven't I?"

Ayeka pinkened, nodding her head.

"I think you did." She acknowledged. "And you promise that Sasami will come later on?"

"When she is calmer and you have rested, Sasami will come." Haru agreed. Ayeka sighed, closing her eyes.

"Good." She murmured. "I must make amends with my sister as soon as possible. I *do* love her, and I must prove that to both of us, before I let this drive us apart."

Chapter 13

Chapter Thirteen

“I’m sorry, Lady Sasami. I have very strict instructions from Lord Haru — The Crown Princess is resting, and noone is to see her at the present time.”

The nurse on duty cast the Princess a sympathetic smile, her expression softening as she saw the girl’s face fall. “I know, you’re worried about your sister. But Lord Haru’s orders are orders — I’m afraid I can’t break them for anyone.”

“Not even me?” Sasami raised beseeching eyes to her companion. “She’s my big sister… doesn’t she want to see even me?”

“Lord Haru said earlier that only he, your Lady Mother and Lord Takeru should be allowed admittance at the moment.” The nurse shook her head. “Lady Ayeka has been badly upset, and I’m sure it’s just a precaution. As I said, she’s resting now. Would you like to leave a message? I can take it to her right away.”

“A message?” Sasami bit her lip, then slowly she shook her head. “No. No thank you. I… the things I need to say I kind of want to say to her myself.”

“I see.” The nurse tilted her head, eying her small companion keenly. “Well, I’m sure things will be different on the morrow. Then you’ll be able to speak to her and I’m sure she’ll be glad of your company then, when she feels a little better.”

“I hope so.” Sasami sighed heavily. “All right. Thank you.”

She turned on her heel, trailing dejectedly back the way she had come. As she reached the entrance, pushing hard on the big wooden doors that led into the Infirmary, she swallowed hard against the tears that glittered in her crimson eyes.

“Ayeka…” She murmured. “But why not? Why would Father… why?”

She made her way slowly down towards the main entrance hall, slipping out into the sunshine and being careful to shut the door firmly behind her as she went. Try as she might, she could not prevent the tears from falling — she had hoped so much to see her sister, and to be so prevented struck fear and doubt into her young heart.

“Ayeka, why won’t they let me see you? Why… why don’t you want me?” She whispered. “Was Yugi right? Do you… do you really hate me? Has everything always been a lie? I don’t believe it — I won’t! I love my sister… but oh, does she really love me as much as I love her? Or does she hate me for being born and taking Mother and Father’s attention away?”

As she reached the swift-running stream where days earlier Yugi had so nearly ended her life, she dropped down onto the grass bank, sprawling headlong as if she were still a child of five or six. She buried her face in her arms, allowing her sobs to take control of her body as her grief wrenched through her young heart.

“Is it because I’m Tsunami?” She murmured. “Is it because everyone wants to hurt Tsunami, that you don’t want to be my sister any more? All this happened to you because of me and my link to the Goddess. I guess… I guess if you hated me for that, I couldn’t blame you. Oh, but Ayeka-oneechan, I don’t want you to hate me! I love you so much… please still want me, even after everything that’s happened! *Please still want me*!”

“Sasami-hime?”

Sasami raised her tearstained face, gazing up at the speaker with a hopeless look in her crimson eyes.

“Kamidake.” She murmured. “But…”

“Your Lord Father wanted me to ascertain that you were all right, Hime-sama. To keep you company, while everything was so unsettled.” Kamidake crouched at her side, putting a tentative hand on her shoulder. “You weren’t at the palace. Why here?”

“Nobody wants me at the palace.” Sasami hiccupped, reaching down to touch the swift running water as she did so, dispersing the Goddess’s reflection with an uncharacteristically sharp sweep of the hand. “The nurse wouldn’t let me into the Infirmary to see Ayeka… she said Father had ordered she was to see noone except him, mother and Lord Takeru until further notice. She doesn’t want me, Kamidake. Yugi was right. She does hate me and I don’t blame her. This is all my fault!”

“I don’t understand.” Kamidake frowned, shaking his head. “Why would you think that? Sasami-hime, nothing is your fault. And I’m sure that Haru-dono didn’t mean you, when he told the nurses to prevent access. I’m sure he just didnt think about it.”

“No, he meant it. I’m sure he did.” Sasami sent him a helpless look.

“Kamidake, I’m Tsunami. And right now I really wish I wasn’t! If I hadn’t been, Yugi would never have hurt Ayeka or tried to make her kill me. And I’d know… I’d know if Ayeka really loved me as much as I love her, or if it was just because of what Mother and Father did to her when I was a baby. I… I love Ayeka more than anyone, and it really hurts to think that she might not love me. That because of Tsunami, she might never love me a… again. I don’t want to lose my sister! I don’t want to be Tsunami any more! I don’t! I hate it so much!”

Kamidake eyed her keenly for a moment. Then he stood, holding out a hand to her. Gingerly Sasami took it and he pulled her gently to her feet.

“Walk with me, Sasami-sama.” He murmured. “Because I was under the impression that you had accepted Tsunami inside of yourself now. That you were resigned to what it will one day mean.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Sasami sighed again, nonetheless falling into step with her companion as he led the way across the palace grounds. “I thought I was. But how can I be, when I think about all the things it’s caused already? I don’t know what I’ll do if Ayeka doesn’t want to be sisters any more. What if it isn’t just a mistake on Father’s part — what if Ayeka really doesn’t want me to go to her?”

“Your Lady sister is extremely fond of you, Hime.” Kamidake said softly. Sasami shook her head, dashing her tears away as yet more fell.

“I don’t see why she should be.” She said bitterly. “I’m the reason everything bad comes to Jurai. I’m the reason Kagato could live on in Souja’s tree. I’m the reason that Tokimi first attacked Tenchi and made Seiryo go after Kiyone and all of those things. I’m the reason that Yugi Kuroda came here and tried to hurt people — *especially* my sister. If I wasn’t Tsunami, none of that would have happened. I would hate me, if I was Ayeka. I’m not safe to be around!”

Kamidake paused for a moment, closing his eyes as he composed his thoughts. Then his grip on the girl’s hand tightened, as he seemed to make up his mind. He nodded, his violet eyes snapping open as he changed his course, heading instead towards a cluster of ferny trees that stood at the furthest edge of the palace grounds.

“Come with me.” He said softly.

“Where are we going?” Sasami gazed up at him in confusion, but Kamidake did not respond. Instead he led the way through the dense tree foliage, pushing branches aside as he navigated roots and the thickly entangled bindweed that had grown across the track. At each

stage, he paused to make sure his companion was managing to keep up with him, and at length they reached a clearing, where large piles of damaged sandstone lay in heaps around a sand-coated circle on the ground. Sasami took a hesitant step forward, then paused, sending her guide a confused look.

"Kamidake?"

"Do you know what this place is, Sasami-sama?" Kamidake released his grip on her hand, moving across to the pile of stone and sitting down carefully on the edge. Sasami shook her head.

"Father doesn't normally let me wander so far from the palace alone." She replied. "I didn't know that there was anything here but trees. Where are we?"

"Tsunami's shrine." Kamidake said simply. Sasami's eyes opened wide.

"What? But…"

"Yes, I know. It's long gone, now." Kamidake nodded, a grave expression touching his face. "Much of the original stone has been robbed for building houses and the place long since abandoned. But in my time, when I was a young soldier, this was my retreat. Faith in Tsunami-kami-sama was still at it's height then, and this was the place where I came each night to speak to my Goddess. Sasami-hime, whenever things were as bad as they possibly could be, this was the one place that gave me hope. The sanctuary that gave me the strength to get up each day and to fight to protect my King and my world from invading forces. Even now, coming here, I feel at peace. Don't you feel it too? This is the true spirit of Tsunami and what she is."

"A pile of crumbled stones?" Sasami asked bleakly, running her fingers idly across the edge of the nearest one, and Kamidake shook his head, taking her hand and guiding it further down the cracked slab to where a worn image of a tree had been engraved.

"No." He said softly. "The *hope* of this planet. The thing that keeps it hovering between life and death. There will always be bad things in the universe, and they will always seek to destroy the things that are truly good. But so long as Tsunami is here, Jurai will never be a victim to those forces. You know better than even I do how strong Tsunami's will really is — and what she is capable of. And she would not have chosen you to be her reincarnation if she didn't believe that you would be strong enough to bear her burden… whatever that burden was. Jurai needs its Goddess more than ever in these times of doubt and scepticism — that is why you were born when you were, to be

Jurai's hope when your world truly needs you. The Cult of Tsunami will thrive and be strong again, under your guidance — and this planet will be at peace with itself once again. These things she prophesied, when she consigned Azaka and I to the sleep of Hades. That is why we are here, and why you are, also."

"It doesn't change what happened to Ayeka because of me." Sasami said sadly.

"No, it doesn't." Kamidake agreed gently. "And I'm sure Ayeka-sama is feeling just as wretched as you are — after all, she could have done you serious harm. But the reason you feel that way is because you love your sister so much as you do. And she loves you, too. Whatever hate Yugi put into her heart, it wasn't really Ayeka-hime who felt that way. There is a strong bond between you, as sisters, that even Yugi's evil couldn't break. That's the truth, Hime-sama. Tsunami chose well, when she chose which family you would be born into."

"Do you *really* think that's true?" Sasami eyed him doubtfully. "That it doesn't matter to them if they become targeted because of me?"

"I think that Tsunami knew they could handle it." Kamidake said quietly. "Just as she knew, when she chose Azaka and I, that we would be able to handle it, too. We gave our lives for you once, Sasami-kami-sama, and we'd do so again if ever you asked us to. You know that."

"I would never ask you to do that for me, Kamidake." Sasami said seriously. Kamidake smiled.

"Well, you never know what the future might bring." He said simply, getting to his feet. "And I, like Azaka, am always at the disposal of my Lady Tsunami."

"And Lady Sasami? Her too?" Sasami asked hesitantly. Kamidake's smile broadened.

"Yes, of course, Hime." He agreed, amusement in his violet eyes. "That's a part of my duty that I would never relinquish."

Sasami sighed heavily, gazing down at the carved tree once more. Then,

"I hope you're always here to give me such good advice, Kamidake." She murmured. "Sometimes I can't see things so clearly. I guess I'm too close to it all, especially this time. But… but I *want* to see Ayeka. Whatever Father says, I need to… to speak to her. So I… I'm not going to give up this time — I'm going to make them let me in

and if they won't, well, I'll just have to find a way to sneak in instead. Even if Father is mad at me for doing it, I still have to know. And if she is angry, well, I need to try and make her not be. I need to know how she feels, and if… and if she still wants to be my sister, after everything that has happened. Because I want it more than anything. And if… if we do have to start over from scratch, well, I… I need to start somewhere."

"I think that would be a good idea, Sasami-sama." Kamidake said gravely. "So shall we head back towards the palace?"

"Yes." Sasami hesitated, then flung her arms around the knight, taking him off guard. "Thank you, Kamidake. Tsunami knew what she was doing when she chose you and Azaka to look after me, too."

"I'm glad you think so." Kamidake laughed, shaking his head slowly. "And I'm sure that your Lady sister will be glad of your visit."

"I sure hope so." Sasami admitted, biting down hard on her lip as she considered. "But either way, well, I… I'm gonna go find out!"

As they drew closer to the palace complex itself, they almost collided headlong with Prince Haru himself, and as Sasami gazed up at her father, she impulsively reached out to grab him by the hands.

"Papa, why can't I see Ayeka?" She asked. "I want to see her — please, why can't I?"

"Sasami." Haru bent to her height, offering her a smile. "Are you still worried about your sister and her regard for you?"

Sasami sniffled, nodding her head slowly, and Haru hugged her tightly.

"Ayeka wants to see you, but she's tired and I've been bad and made her rest." He said softly. "And just as soon as she wakes up, I promise, you'll be the first visitor she has. Is that all right?"

"Really?" Sasami's eyes lit up with hope, and she pulled back from her father's embrace, searching his eyes for any sign of falsehood. "You mean it? She really wants to see me?"

"She really does." Haru nodded. "Sasami-chan, whatever that creature Yugi may have told you, Ayeka loves you very much. Don't ever doubt that, all right? My girls have always shared a special bond and it takes more than a misguided demon to break it, doesn't it?"

"Of course it does." Sasami's eyes sparkled and she gave a little skip and jump, turning to Kamidake with a wide grin.

“Ayeka wants to see me after all!”

“Didn’t I tell you it would be all right?” Kamidake eyed her fondly. “No need to cry all those tears, Hime-sama. Ayeka-sama is just tired. That’s all.”

“Thank you for keeping an eye to her, Kamidake.” Haru said gravely, and Kamidake bowed before the Prince, offering him a smile.

“It’s always my pleasure, Lord Haru. I take Lady Sasami’s welfare very seriously indeed.” He said softly. Haru looked thoughtful.

“That’s good.” He said at length. “Because Ayeka said other things to me too, Sasami, and I wonder if she might be right. Things about you, and how much I prevent you from really seeing Jurai court life. You are growing and very quickly now too.”

“Papa?” Sasami stared at the Prince in surprise, and Haru grinned, touching her cheek affectionately.

“If there are things you want to know, then come to me and we’ll see what we can work out.” He said gently. “I don’t want to make all your decisions for you as you grow. You need to make some of your own, so when you think you are ready to come sit in on the Council, or speak about Tsunami to people, then I will trust your judgement. You have wise souls like Azaka and Kamidake to advise you already, so I will have faith in you to make the right decisions yourself from now on. All right?”

Sasami’s eyes became big with wonder, and Haru laughed, hugging his younger child tightly once more.

“I’m glad you are all right, Sasami-chan.” He said warmly, and Sasami cuddled up against her father’s frame, comforted by the arms that held her.

“Everything is going to be all right now.” She murmured. “Everything. I just know it is.”

The Council Chamber was quiet as Seiryo pushed back the doors, stepping apprehensively in through the imposing arched entrance and glancing around him, biting his lip as he debated the reasons for his summons. After the events of the previous day, Jurai was still in something of a disarray, and when Azaka had arrived at the Tennan estate, bringing a message from the Emperor, Seiryo had been concerned at the nature of the sudden call. After all, he mused now, resisting the urge to turn tail and flee, he had been abusing his

priveleges, his training and his probation in every way possible since he had become embroiled in the cracking of the Kuroda file. And now the whole business was out in the open, he half-wondered whether his King intended to punish him further for his breaches of security.

“You have made good time, Lord Tennan.”

Azusa’s voice startled him out of his reverie and he glanced up, meeting the Emperor’s gaze with a trepidant one of his own. Azusa raised an arm, beckoning for the nobleman to join him and not without misgivings, Seiryo did as he was bidden, hastening up the steps to the uppermost dais and dropping to his knees before his King.

For a moment there was silence, then Azusa rested a hand on his shoulder.

“Stand before me, Lord Tennan.” He said softly. “And meet my eyes.”

Slowly Seiryo stood, struggling to maintain his composure as the Emperor’s gaze ran thoughtfully over him. Then, Azusa offered a slight smile, bowing his own head towards his companion.

“You are proving to be one of the most unusual young men I have had on my council for some time.” He remarked slowly. “First you go all out to betray me, and then you risk your life and your status to protect your planet. You don’t do things by halves, do you, Lord Tennan? It’s either all or nothing.”

Seiryo’s malachite eyes sparkled with surprise, and the Emperor’s smile broadened. He gestured towards an empty seat, indicating for Seiryo to sit down and the man did so, even as his Emperor made himself comfortable once more on the ornately carved throne that had borne the Kings of Jurai for generations long since past. He eyed Seiryo keenly for a moment, then nodded.

“Your methods are unconventional.” He said at length. “Tell me, when you came in possession of this file, why did you not bring it to my attention at once? Surely you knew that we wanted closure to the Sumire case.”

“I wasn’t sure that your Highness trusted me.” Seiryo said quietly. “Considering my previous record, I wouldn’t have expected you to believe me — in fact, you might have thought me complicit.”

“And the file came into your hands from that young friend of Ayeka’s? Miss Makibi?”

Seiryo nodded.

“Did you seek to protect her, also?” Azusa asked enquiringly. “Heisting top secret files is a serious offence in itself, after all.”

“I had a debt to repay Miss Makibi.” Seiryo said simply. “But I was the one who broke into the file. She doesn’t have those skills, so she should not be blamed. I took it upon myself to tackle the file itself. She may have inadvertently brought it from Headquarters, but I was the one who read it first.”

Amusement flickered in Azusa’s dark red eyes and he nodded.

“You needn’t be so prudent or circumspect, Lord Seiryo.” He said gently. “Neither you nor Detective Makibi are going to face any further action for this business. In fact, Jurai are indebted to both of you for pursuing it. You have, I see, a considerable array of skills from your days at the Galaxy Police… so long as you know for future reference that I do like to be kept abreast of things occuring on my planet, I would not be surprised if we don’t find ourselves making good use of them as time goes on.”

“My Lord?” Seiryo eyed the Emperor warily, and Azusa chuckled, shaking his head.

“There are many things about you which I don’t understand, yet.” He admitted. “And other things which I don’t know how to explain. Your father’s death, your devotion to poor Tokimi-san… your willingness to become involved in secret plots to expose and destroy demons that threaten Jurai. Whether you are a threat or an asset to this world, I’m not quite sure. But I’m interested to find out.”

Seiryo flushed red at this, shaking his head.

“My father died of an unfortunate accident.” He said frankly. “And if Lord Haru was to dope me with your truth serum, I would tell you the same thing. I did not kill him. I have taken lives only in the pursuit of my career with the Galaxy Police — in a situation where it was kill or be killed. If that means I have blood on my hands, then yes, I am a killer. But Father’s death was not my doing. I may have wished for it to happen,and I won’t pretend I didn’t loathe the man with all my heart. But I did not kill him. I swear it on the Tennan family name, my King.”

“I see.” Azusa looked thoughtful. “I am inclined to believe you. Lord Takeru has mentioned to me, since Seiji-dono’s death, that there were concerns about his financial suitability. His… *control* of the Royal finances. But I have taken a look at the records and found nothing out of place. You have worked hard to take up the reins since then — I appreciate that.”

“Father made some wrong decisions.” Seiryo bit his lip. “But he did not appropriate royal money, Lord Azusa. And I have paid off all of his outstanding debts with my money from the Galaxy Police. There is no risk to your money at my hands… I am not my Father’s son. When I swore my oath to you I meant it. I am loyal to Jurai — I’m not a threat.”

“And Lady Tokimi?”

“Tokimi is impaired, and she needs me.” Seiryo said quietly. “I won’t forsake her. We have a bond between us, because the same evil magic hurt and scarred us both. So with your permission, I will continue to care for and protect her as a part of my own family. She has noone else on this world who will do it for her, and she means noone any harm. She shouldn’t be blamed for Kihaku’s magic.”

Azusa sat back in his chair, eying his companion keenly.

“I have already intimated to Lady Washu that Tokimi is welcome on Jurai.” He said softly. “But if you do not blame her for these acts, Seiryo-dono, why do you persist in punishing yourself so harshly for your own?”

“My King?” Seiryo stared, and Azusa nodded.

“You have worked tooth and nail to establish yourself in a position of loyalty within my court.” He said carefully. “You have paid Unko’s fees in person without complaint, and you said yourself that you seek to make amends to Detective Makibi for your misguided actions while under Kihaku’s influence. You have withdrawn from the Galaxy Police, although considering your recent activities on Jurai, you seem to be missing it excessively. You put your life in danger to help protect my nieces… and yet you are not at full fitness yourself. You have inherited your father’s messy dynastic position, with no experience or training on being a Lord of Jurai, whilst having a young sister and a terminally ill mother still within your care. You have never asked for my help, Lord Tennan — do you mistrust your Emperor so much?”

“I…”

“Family pride can go too far, my boy.” Azusa rested his hand on Seiryo’s shoulder, shaking his head.

“I have struggled to make you out, and now I think I have your measure. I have no further doubts in your loyalty or your intentions towards Jurai — but I don’t want you to feel that the Imperial Throne is unsympathetic.”

“Thank you, Lord Azusa.” Seiryo bowed his head slightly, gathering

his wits. “I appreciate that. But really, there is nothing that you should worry about. Suki is far from helpless, and I have always had her support. And my mother’s health has been a concern for a long time — there is nothing to be done there except to see that she is comfortable for as long as we have her.”

“I see.” Azusa pursed his lips. “And your own health? I have heard much of your exploits with the Galaxy Police — these are the deeds of a fit, energetic young fighter. And yet here you often seem tired, withdrawn and troubled, and I’m afraid it promotes mistrust from those around you. I alone know that you were quite unwell when you first returned to Jurai, from your sister’s plea to sit on the Council after your hearing’s verdict. But that was six months past. Do these things plague you still?”

Seiryo hesitated for a moment, then he raised his gaze to his Emperor, meeting the man’s eyes with honest malachite ones of his own.

“Yes.” He admitted. “But that’s my burden to bear, not the throne of Jurai’s. It will not prevent me from doing my job, and I am strong enough to overcome it. My experiences with Tokimi have taught me more about myself and what I can master than anything else my life has thrown at me. I won’t run away from those lessons.”

“Fine words, Seiryo-sama.” Azusa nodded his head. “And I am glad to hear such resolve in your voice. Six months ago, the matter distressed me greatly. That one of our own would be so caught up in negativity… to forgive you and trust you to rebuild your life was always a gamble. And yet, with the arguments of Lady Washu so persuasive in my mind, I bowed to her judgement. She is a wise woman, even if she is an enigma in her own right. And that being so, I listened to what she said. I think she has been proven right, in her assessment of Tokimi’s magic and your true will.”

He grasped Seiryo tightly by the hand, a warm grin crossing his face, and in that moment, Seiryo saw a different side to the Emperor from the composed, often solemn King that headed Jurai’s council.

“I am proud to have you sworn onto my Council, Lord Tennan.” The Emperor said sincerely. “And I feel that you can only go upwards from here. You may consider your probationary period at an end. You are now in my trust, and as such, your movements are no longer restricted to Jurai. I will ensure that Takeru knows to release the Unko back into your custody, and my brother has already been instructed to pass your travel papers back to you — although understandably he is preoccupied with his daughter’s welfare at the minute, he will see to it

as soon as he can."

Seiryo stared at the Emperor in speechless silence, and Azusa's grin broadened.

"You are forgiven for your past deeds." He said softly. "Stand, Lord Tennan. I don't believe I've made a mistake — have I?"

"No, my Lord." Seiryo obediently got to his feet, bowing before his King and then meeting his gaze with a genuinely warm smile of his own. "And I appreciate it. The past year has been a trying one for me and for my family, but that we can begin to put it behind us and move on… that's what we all want, now."

"Then I will see you, no doubt, at Council session as usual tomorrow morning." Azusa said contemplatively. "That is all I wanted to see you about. Just remember that next time someone passes you a highly encrypted top secret file, your first duty is to inform your Emperor!"

Humour sparkled in Seiryo's eyes and in that moment he felt a genuine respect for his companion. He nodded his head.

"I will remember, my Lord." He agreed. "*If* there's a next time."

"Unfortunately, on a planet as prominent as Jurai, it seems likely that there will always be a 'next time'" Azusa said ruefully. "But it comforts me some to know that, when it occurs, I have a fully trained Agent of the Galaxy Police fighting on my team. That is all, Lord Tennan. You are dismissed."

"My Lord." Seiryo bowed again, then withdrew from the Council Chamber, his mind whirling as he ran over the conversation in his head.

"I never really thought about Azusa as a man before, but maybe I've under-estimated the role of a nobleman of Jurai after all." He mused. "Perhaps I should stop looking back towards the Galaxy Police with regret. It strikes me that there is a future here for the Tennan family… but most of all, there's a future here for *me*, regardless of how much I've changed. Father might be turning in his grave to hear Azusa-heika place such trust and faith in me… but it doesn't matter. Father's ghost no longer hangs over the Tennan name and nor does the reputation of grasping, ambitious greed. I've learnt enough about wanting the world — and the consequences for trying to achieve it. Things will be different now, but I think they'll be all right… for all of us. Being a part of Azusa's council might not prove to be as boring or as predictable as I first feared. My King has faith in me… and for the

first time in my life, that actually means something to me. Who knows? Perhaps I *am* cut out to be a Peer of Jurai, after all!"

"Lord Tennan?"

As he left the palace conclave, a voice called his name and he turned, seeing the Prince Consort standing watching him hesitantly. Seiryo paused, faltering for a moment and then bowing his head in deference to the man's status.

"Lord Takeru." He said softly.

"I believe I may, in part, owe you my wife's life." The Prince Consort spoke awkwardly. "I don't fully understand everything that happened, but I still feel that I am some way in your debt. And I'm not quite sure how to thank you."

"I am sworn to defend and honour the Emperor and the Crown Princess." Seiryo said impassively. "Is it not my duty as a noble of Jurai to do so?"

"Well, yes it is, but…"

"I see." A droll smile touched Seiryo's lips. "So you believe the Tennans so devoid of honour that you can't imagine any of us keeping the oaths we make?"

"Lord Tennan…"

"I have made mistakes." Seiryo spoke quietly. "There's no escaping that. But I am not a demon. Tokimi and I have both been freed from the spell we were under. You now know it first hand, Takeru-dono — what black magic can do. You would never doubt Lady Ayeka's true nature… yet you persist in doubting both mine and Tokimi-sama's intentions. Not everything is as it seems. Just because I could not stand you as a boy doesn't mean that I'm against the Crown or my Emperor. The King realises this — he has just invested me with his trust. Perhaps you could try to do the same, now that the crisis has been averted? Kihaku's magic made me do things I would not normally do. Yugi Kuroda's did the same for Ayeka. That is all."

"I'm sorry." Takeru acknowledged, and Seiryo was amazed to hear the sincerity in the other man's tones. "You are right, Tennan-dono. I've applied different rules to you and to Ayeka because of our history. Ayeka could very well have slain people while under Yugi's spell. It doesn't mean that, now the spell is broken, that those things were her true will or intention. And I should not be so quick to judge you and yours. Should I?"

“It would be a first if an Imada didn’t judge a Tennan at first glance.” Seiryo said sardonically. “If you want the truth, though, I don’t suppose I did it for you or even for Lady Ayeka’s sake, in the end. I did it for Tokimi, because she was being made a scapegoat and I don’t like her being bullied. And I wanted to help Lady Sasami, because of all of the Imperial class, she has always treated me with equanimity and respect. Through her association with my sister, I have come to know her and I consider her a genuine friend of my own, too. I may have sworn no oath of fealty to her, but I would fight in her name if ever she asked me to. She is a true Princess of Jurai, Takeru-dono. And I would do anything it took to defend her for being so, too.”

“I see.” Takeru fell silent for a moment, digesting this. “Well, I have misjudged you once too many times, I admit that. I am grateful for what you have done, Seiryo-dono. Any doubts in my mind about your motives have been erased and I’m sure Ayeka understands how much you did in this matter, too. I know she’ll want to thank you herself, somehow.”

“I want no reward.” Seiryo said flatly. “There’s nothing the Crown of Jurai could offer me that I don’t already have.”

Takeru stared at him, floored, and Seiryo offered another slight smile.

“I am not quite the man I was when we fought over Amane.” He said softly. “We all grow up. Sometimes it just takes a little longer, that’s all. You did not see me at my best when we fought on the Earth… but the Galaxy Police taught me to be self-sufficient and strong in ways you’ve never had to experience. Kihaku’s dark lure taught me that the most important thing I have is my family. Lady Suki and my mother. And Tokimi too, now. She’s as much a part of my family as they are, these days. Whatever you think of her, I understand what she’s been through and I won’t forsake her because of that. Regardless of what you think of her Kii origins.”

“Lady Washu is also Kii. Tokimi will not be judged on that basis.” Takeru said gravely. “She has been sorely treated, Seiryo-sama, I am sorry for that. And I will do all in my power to ensure such treatment does not happen again. You have my word.”

“I appreciate that.” Seiryo inclined his head slightly.

“And what of Lady Sasami? Will you swear fealty to her, now, in the aftermath of this?” Takeru eyed him keenly. “Haru-dono has mentioned a couple of times since Ayeka’s incapacitation how Sasami

will need retinue of her own now she's come of age. Will you wish to be a part of that?"

"That is for the Lady Sasami to decide." Seiryo said quietly. "Not me."

"I almost wonder, the way you speak, whether you plan to approach Lord Haru for Sasami's hand in marriage." Takeru observed thoughtfully. Seiryo's eyes widened in shock and anger.

"Is that what you think?" He demanded. "That I seek to advance my own position by claiming loyalty to Sasami-sama? We are not all Imadas, Takeru! We don't all marry Princesses to make us feel more important about our own roles in things. I told you. There is nothing the Crown can give me that I don't already have. And I do not want Lady Sasami's hand in marriage. You are an idiot if you don't realise her heart is spoken for, anyway. And as for me — I have no interest in marrying royal blood. It's more trouble than it's worth, this Jurai power. I am heartily sick of magic and anything connected with it."

"I'm sorry. I meant no offence." Takeru held up his hands. "But what do you mean — Sasami is spoken for? Lord Haru is very decided…"

"Open your eyes, you fool." Seiryo snapped, and Takeru bristled at the tone in his voice.

"You forget yourself."

"No… I found myself." Seiryo returned neatly. "I found myself in this world of mad politics and magic-worship called Jurai, and I'm beginning to find my place in it at long last. I am loyal to my King, and I have much respect for his integrity and his strength of character. But I will speak plainly to you, because you *are* a fool. And if you don't want to be swept away by mayhem when your wife becomes Queen, I advise you start learning about things beyond the confines of Jurai's court. There is a lot more out there than the squabbling of noble men and women looking for land and prestige. Ayeka-sama may be aware of it, but you are not. And if you ever hope to make her a decent Prince Consort, it's high time you realised that Jurai's position in this universe is far more external than you give it credit for. So long as this is Tsunami's world, people will seek to destroy it. You must be prepared for that, or we are all doomed to death."

With that he turned on his heel, pulling his cloak more tightly around him as he made his way purposefully towards the chamber's exit.

“Lord Tennan!” Takeru called him back and at the doorway, he paused, turning to gaze at the Consort expectantly.

“Yes, my Lord Consort?”

“I will bear it in mind.” Takeru said simply. Seiryo started, then a slight smile touched his lips.

“Then maybe you are a better choice of Prince than I’ve given you credit for.” He said softly. “Good day, Lord Takeru. Give my regards to the Lady Ayeka and wish her a swift recovery.”

Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen

“Do you think we’ll ever get to come to Jurai and just have a nice, peaceful visit?”

Ryoko leant up against her companion, raising big golden eyes to his gentle brown ones as a gentle breeze fluttered around them, dancing and teasing at her wild, wavy hair. “Tenchi, I don’t know why you insist on coming back here so often. If one of us doesn’t get almost killed either during our stay or on our journey home, then it’s almost like something is missing in our visit. Don’t you think so?”

Tenchi cast his fiancee a crooked smile, affection in his expression as she wrapped his arm more securely around her, shrugging his shoulders. It was the following evening and, after the chaos had died down, Jurai was finally beginning to return to some semblance of normality. Taking advantage of the bright night, Ryoko had lured her companion up into the branches of one of the biggest, sturdiest palace trees, and together they had watched the sun set over the distant hills.

“You might have a point.” He owned now, pursing his lips as he reflected on her words. “But despite that, Ryoko, I don’t want us to stop coming here from time to time. Aside from our political obligations on the Earth as liasons, we have family here. And even when we’re married and settled, I’d like to think that that family won’t be written out of our lives altogether.”

“I don’t think we could, even if we wanted to.” Ryoko said thoughtfully. “You know, when Haru told Ayeka and I what he and Misaki had done to me and to her memories, all those years ago, I was really angry at him. But not because of the things he said regarding me and my isolation from the Jurai royal palace. I was angry because of what they’d done to hurt Ayeka. She was so upset… so unlike herself. And I felt furious with him that he’d do something like that to his own daughter. I guess I realised that these days Ayeka and I are a lot closer than I ever really thought possible.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that too.” Tenchi nodded his head. “And I’m glad it’s the case, to be honest. Poor Ayeka has had a lot to deal with. That she has both of us supporting her might help, at least a little bit.”

“Mmm.” Ryoko agreed. “Perhaps I realised that the only thing

between us when we were children was the suspicion and paranoia of Lord Haru himself. He put ideas into Ayeka's head, and put pressure on people where I was concerned. They didn't understand my magic and once I realised I wasn't going to be accepted, I did go to lengths to annoy and frighten people. But even so…"

"You might have grown up like family." Tenchi looked pensive. "Did you think of that, Ryoko? Almost like sisters, even — would you have liked that?"

Ryoko glanced at her hands for a moment, thinking this over. Then,

"If I had never left Jurai with Haki, I would never have been a pirate." She said slowly. "If I'd never run away from the palace when I was twelve or thirteen, I wouldn't have met or rescued Ryo Ohki. And if those things hadn't happened, I might not have met you. I don't regret the way my life turned out. I got to do what I wanted for a lot of the time, and even if times were sometimes tricky, it was always fun to play chase with the Galaxy Police. I don't think I would have fitted into that Juraian high society any more than I actually did. I was different, even if I was descended from Aiko and Kagato's line. Maybe I was just too Kii to fit in on Jurai. Either way, it's academic and I don't really dwell on things that can't be changed. It's just interesting to consider, that's all. I wouldn't change anything that's happened."

"We might still have met." Tenchi shrugged. "I have Jurai blood, and that might have come out sooner or later. I might have met you here, on Jurai, at some point in my life."

"And then you might not have liked the girl I was." Ryoko's eyes twinkled with mischief. "I'm a pirate and a villain. I cause trouble and I tease and play games and do all the things that drive you mad. But those are the reasons you love me, too. I know that, even if you don't always admit it. You've got used to me as me, and that's who you love. If I'd been some snooty Princess, like Ayeka, you might have just passed me by. Princesses aren't your type. So I'm fine with being the Ryoko I am. In truth, I'm more worried about Ayeka. I've never regretted who I became… but she's doubting everything at the moment. It's hard when you have a whole bunch of memories dumped on you, and you realise things weren't quite how you remembered they were."

"Yes, I suppose that's true." Tenchi sighed. "I feel bad for her too. She does love Sasami, but she must wonder if that was put on her by Haru, rather than it being genuine. You and me, we were only children. I suppose neither of us can really understand what it's like to

suddenly have a new baby thrust into the equation. She must wonder how much of her animosity towards baby Sasami was Yugi and how much was her own."

"I don't think it matters very much." Ryoko said frankly. "It's more important that she loves Sasami now, whatever happened in the past. That's the thing with memories. They don't actually change what's happening now. They might freak you out or make you doubt things you didn't doubt before. But at the end of the day, they're things that are done with. Our adventures with Hotsuma should've told you that!"

"When Ayeka was in your room the other day, was that because of her attack on you, or something else?" Tenchi asked. "I got the impression that, well, you'd been talking about something… serious."

"Maybe we had." Ryoko shrugged. "But I promised her that I wouldn't speak about it, and I'll keep my word. It's not any of your business anyway, Tenchi-kun. I told you. It was girl stuff."

"Girl stuff, huh?" Tenchi eyed her keenly. "Forgive me for finding that a touch surreal — you and Ayeka huddled away somewhere whispering secrets to one another."

"Well, things change." Ryoko pursed her lips. "And in some respects, it wasn't so strange. I think that we've both moved a long way past the rivalry. Like I said, I'm worried about her. This is a lot to deal with."

"And yet you still think we should leave Jurai?" Tenchi asked. Ryoko hesitated, then she nodded her head.

"The poor girl has a lot to deal with without us imposing on her." She agreed. "So yes, I think we should. Even if Washu chooses to stay behind for a while to help Tokimi further, I think you and I should go… go home. And let Ayeka and her family recover themselves without our interference. After all, Lord Haru has a lot of grovelling to do, and it might be a while before Ayeka forgives him fully."

She laughed ruefully, shrugging her shoulders.

"If it was me, I probably never would." She added. "But that's just me. Ayeka obviously knows a better side of him than I ever have."

"At least he did acknowledge to you his part in your isolation." Tenchi pointed out. "You might yet manage to make amends with him, you know."

"I don't want anything to do with Haru, now or ever." Ryoko said simply. "Another thing that happens when we come here is that I find

out nasty, icky things about people I didn't have much time for anyway. The last thing I want to do is spend time with Prince Haru and discover even more."

She paused, and a faint smile touched her lips.

"But it was a little bit nice that he told me that Azusa did want to keep me." She admitted. "It's strange, but I do appreciate that."

"I find it hard to imagine you as a child here." Tenchi owned. "It doesn't seem at all like your world. Even though I know your roots and your history now — it still doesn't seem like somewhere you'd ever call home."

"Until I was eight, I was Azusa's ward and he was good to me." Ryoko shrugged. "I almost became fond of him, in the absence of my mother. I guess I never had a father, so I looked up to him as that kind of person in my life. I never called him Papa, and he never called me daughter… but he did always seem happy to see me, and I looked forward to spending odd occasions with him, when I was able. He took the time to play with me from time to time — I guess that with his own son abandoning Jurai, he was a bit at a loss himself. He was the one person in Jurai's court who had time for me, and I locked onto that, in the absence of anyone else. But we were the same, in a sense. I lost Kichi, and he lost Yosho. It brought us together in a strange kind of way."

She laughed, looking embarrassed.

"Pathetic, isn't it? But it hurt me when I was suddenly cast away like I was. Made to live with the servants, and suddenly not able to see him any more. At least knowing that it wasn't his choice to send me away makes me a little better disposed towards him. *Especially* now I'm marrying into his direct family line. You know, you can't be too careful about things like that. Bloodlines are important when you're a pirate of my standing… it's not good form to marry just any old Prince you happen to crash into."

Tenchi chuckled.

"And I'll do?"

"I suppose so." Ryoko nodded, an impish look crossing her amber eyes. "I might even drop my grudge against the house of Jurai, when we're married. Haru excepted — it might not be so bad to acknowledge them as my family too."

"Well, they already are." Tenchi reflected. "In one way or another, this world is a part of both of us."

“But home to neither one.” Ryoko murmured pensively. “The Earth is that… and I’m glad, Tenchi-kun. Jurai is too full of problems and social rules for either of us to be happy here. It will be nice to get back to the mountains and start plotting things like your graduation and what we’re going to do when you’re all qualified. Things like whether we’re still going to visit Osaka, and see friends there. Things beyond university… beyond space piracy. Things in our future. You know?”

“Yeah, I do know.” Tenchi agreed. “It will be nice, but strange when college finishes. But I know that Ikeda-kun is planning on moving to Osaka permanently, and Sakura’s family are in Okayama anyway — I think she’ll be staying, too. As for Kamikura and the rest, I don’t know — but honestly, they’ve barely spoken to me much since the whole alien thing became national news. Kyoda and I have almost come to blows on one or two occasions over the fact I’m seeing you, in fact… it might be better if they’re not still hanging around after it’s all done.”

“Fighting over me? Can I come watch next time?” Ryoko teased. “Although it would hardly be a fair fight. You’ve taken down some of the Universe’s most dangerous — a college kid with a chip on his shoulder would be no challenge.”

“Not Yugi Kuroda, though.” Tenchi looked sheepish. “I still can’t believe I let you all battle that out and didn’t even try and help.”

“Azusa had you locked away.” Ryoko pointed out. “And we managed. You can’t always be the hero, Tenchi-kun. No matter how much you might want to be.”

“Well, I did at least finally tell him about our engagement.” Tenchi laughed. “And he didn’t seem to mind the idea too badly. He even accepted that I wanted to marry you on the Earth, not here on Jurai. He said that we’d always be welcome at his court, and that my help was often invaluable to the people and court of Jurai. So there you have it. Imperial blessing achieved.”

“Not that we ever really needed it, but I guess he is an old softie, deep down.” Ryoko mused. “I’m glad. He’s unlikely to send a party of military ships to the Earth to split us up, if that’s the case.”

“Well, you said he was fond of you, when you were small. Maybe he’s doing penance.” Tenchi bantered. Ryoko grinned.

“That suits me fine.” She said warmly. “Though I’m really not that mad at him. I’ll always hate Lord Haru, but like I said, it’s all in the past. I’m not the one with the issues this time.”

“Have you spoken to Ayeka, since everything happened?” Tenchi asked her, and Ryoko nodded.

“I did sneak into the Infirmary, late last night, when Haru’s bodyguards were looking the other way. We spoke for a while.” She agreed gravely. “She’s a tough person, Tenchi. She’ll be fine… but she has to work it out for herself, what it all means. Still, if nothing else, this whole experience did forge a bond between us that wasn’t really there in the same way before. We were almost friends, we had a truce… but now I think we really did cross that line.”

“It’s about time you did.” Tenchi said firmly. “All that fighting was silly and unecessary. Ayeka is married, and you and I will be, when we’ve sat down and thought about setting a date. So all of that’s in the past too. No more fighting. Right?”

“I guess not. Not with Ayeka, anyhow.” Ryoko eyed her hands thoughtfully, gentle flickers of amber light dancing across her tips. “But Lord Haru had better watch his step. He’d better make it up to her — to both Ayeka and Sasami — by the time I next visit Jurai… else he might find he regrets it even more.”

Tenchi laughed.

“No more fighting.” He repeated, putting a hand on her arm. “We don’t need it. We’ll go back to the Earth, and let Ayeka do as you said — work out her life and the problems she has to face. So long as she knows we’re always there for her, as friends and as family, that’s what’s important. So long as she knows that, we’ll go. And if she needs us, she knows where she can find us.”

“And then you have to thread it this way, like this, so that the stem goes all the way through the loop. Here, Tokimi, give it a try.”

Gently Suki held out the flowers to her companion, who took them carefully in her hands, eying them for a moment and then beginning to gingerly weave them together.

“Like this?”

“Yes, just like that.” Suki nodded. “You’re picking it up quickly, Tokimi… you’re a fast learner, you know.”

Tokimi beamed, casting her gaze across the grass to where Seiryo and Washu were sitting watching them, Washu curled up against the lee of a large hunk of stone and Seiryo settled beneath the shade of an overhanging Camelia tree. She held up her prize, and Washu chuckled, giving her sister the thumbs up sign as she did so.

“You know, I hadn’t imagined that floral weaving lessons were on the agenda of a Peer of Jurai.” She remarked as Tokimi returned to her endeavour, sending Seiryo a playful glance. “Of all things to spend your afternoon doing, Seiryo-sama, I never thought you’d be watching Sasami and Suki teach Tokimi how to thread flowers.”

“Well, everyone has to kick back and relax once in a while.” Seiryo looked rueful, glancing at his hands. “And Tokimi was determined — she never got to drag me out to the flower fields at the palace, so it seemed fair to give her her way here. Besides, with how busy both Suki and I have been, coming into the grounds of our own Estate doesn’t seem to happen very often. It’s nice to just sit and enjoy Jurai’s sunshine — and know that nobody is about to jump up and kill anyone else.”

Washu let out an appreciative laugh, nodding her head at his wry remarks.

“I suppose you have a point.” She acknowledged. “I want to thank you, by the way, for keeping your word about Tokimi. I realise that you put your neck on the line a couple of times for her, and she seems quite at home here, with you and with Suki. If you don’t mind, I’d like her to stay here, even when I’ve gone. I don’t think she could be as happy and settled on the Earth and besides, she really seems to look up to you.”

“I can’t imagine why, but she’s more than welcome.” Seiryo shrugged his shoulders. “Suki sees her as a younger sister, even though Tokimi is quite evidently much much older. And I suppose I’m fond of her, too. It’s strange, but I suppose bonds do surpass the magic that instills them. Either way, she can stay.”

“I heard that you’d had your ship returned to you. Congratulations, Lord Tennan.” Washu’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “It seems you’re back in Azusa’s good books, after your recent exploits.”

“I think so.” Seiryo nodded. “For the first time I think I saw him as a man as well as a King. I realised he cares for his family — for Lady Ayeka and Lady Sasami — as much as I care for mine. I’m quite content with how everything has resolved itself, in truth. While there will always be idiots at court who have things to say, my King has faith in me, and that’s more important when it comes to political survival. As for anything else, well, I have my family and Tokimi and I don’t care for the good opinion of most of the Council. So yes. You might say that this is something of a happy ending for everyone.”

“Perhaps not Yugi.” Washu’s expression became thoughtful. “What

Lord Haru will decide, I don't know — but imprisoning her once didn't work. I really don't think he'll have much choice but to destroy her the way they destroyed her mother. I don't hold with the superstition that demons are sub-human entities, but I do believe humanoids can become demonic if allowed to grow in the wrong direction. Yugi's black nature is too far absorbed into her soul for her to be pacified… I'm afraid that there may yet be more bloodshed in the name of Jurai's peace."

"I'm thankful that such a decision is out of my hands." Seiryo agreed. "Strange as it might be, I really don't like the idea of being branded a killer."

"In that regard, I think you've more than done penance." Washu crossed her legs, settling herself more comfortably on the grass. "Dare I say that you and Kiyone have even found common ground now, between you?"

"I don't know, but at least she doesn't bother me the way she did, before." Seiryo looked rueful. "I suppose in helping to get her out of that laboratory, I repaid the debt I owed her in my own mind."

He pursed his lips, sending his companion a sidelong glance.

"Washu-sama, Tokimi's treatment — do you think that she will ever be fully cured of the effects of Kihaku's magic?"

"Hard to say." Washu frowned. "Sometimes she seems more lucid than others, and clearly there is a language barrier still. It's hard to improve her grasp of Galactic Tongue when sometimes her mind seems to wander. But on balance, she seems to have improved some even since she woke up. She might be childlike, but she understands certain concepts and if she continues to do so, maybe I can continue to heal her. I don't know… my limits are undefined, even now."

She looked sheepish.

"I'm a trainee doctor working from the manuals and hoping something works." She admitted. "But I'll keep trying, at least so long as she tolerates me doing so."

"Then I want to ask a favour of you also, if you don't mind." Seiryo pursed his lips, hesitating for a moment as a shriek of laughter came from his sister across the grass. The sound was echoed by Sasami a moment later and, as Tokimi stared at her companions in bewilderment, a smile began to touch her lips too. As Sasami hugged her companion tightly, Seiryo saw genuine joy in Tokimi's expression, and his own eyes became clouded. He shook his head.

“Ignorance can be bliss, huh?” He murmured. “What she doesn’t remember can’t hurt her. She’s compromised and yet, she doesn’t seem to suffer. Even if her mind is simplistic, she still seems strong and well — able to face the world and live her life, however different that might be now. Is that something unique to the Kii, Washu-sama? Or is it something open to all?”

“You’ve lost me.” Washu frowned. “You said you wanted a favour… but Seiryo, I don’t think I understand completely what you mean.”

Seiryo sighed.

“I told my Emperor that I had made my mistakes and I would not run from the consequences.” He said quietly. “But I have much responsibility, and much more to do now than I ever did before. My spirit is willing — it has healed and it no longer feels so strongly the guilt of those actions long since past. But…”

“But the physical effects still linger.” Understanding flickered in Washu’s green eyes. “I see. You hope I might do for you what I’ve begun to do for Tokimi?”

“Somehow, even though she was so infested for so long, she seems to suffer no pain.” Seiryo’s eyes darted back to where the former priestess was busily gathering flowers from one of the big, blooming bushes that stood along the edge of the lawn. “And I suppose I wondered if that was down to your interference. If there was something you could do for me, too… well, I have always been active, fit and strong, and to do my duties properly I must be so again. But I can’t fight any harder than I already have done. So I wondered… if you would help me.”

“I have no idea whether my magic would work the same way on you as it did on Tokimi.” Washu warned. “And there is really no guarantee that my inexperience didn’t damage her mind at the same time as trying to heal it. It would be risky, Seiryo-san… I can’t know for sure the outcome.”

“I have faith in you.” Seiryo told her, sending her a slight smile. “You’ve more or less stood by me and my family in one way or another since events occured, even though in many ways you should probably have come to hate me. I tried to kill your daughter, your friend, your friend’s husband — not to mention that I sought to hurt the world you now call home. That you have been a friend to Suki and I has been much appreciated, and I know I am asking even more of you. But I am willing to take a small risk. I know all about the after-effects of Kii magic, but even though you obviously have a lot of

strength, you didn't use that magic to kill Yugi. We both know you probably could have done, but you didn't. So I'm fairly confident you won't kill me, either. Will you consider it, Washu-sama? I'd be grateful to you, if you did."

Washu pursed her lips for a moment, then an impish look crossed her expression.

"All right. So long as you do one thing for me in return." She said mischievously. Seiryo looked startled.

"What kind of a thing?"

"You could stop calling me Washu-sama." Washu said carelessly. "You can just call me Washu, since you call my sister Tokimi, after all. And if you feel you simply can't live without tagging my name somehow, you can always call me Washu-chan. I always liked that."

"Washu… chan?" Seiryo stared at her, non-plussed. "You're quite possibly a hundred times older than I am. Why would I ever call you Washu-chan?"

Washu chuckled.

"Oh, well, it's a long story. Old habits die hard, I guess." She said, amused. "But really, Washu is fine. After all, I'm rude enough not to stand on ceremony all the time — more often as not I forget that you and Suki are Lord and Lady. Humour me, huh? And I'll see what I can do, regarding your request."

"Well, I suppose that's a deal." Seiryo still looked confused, but he offered her a smile anyway. "Thank you, Washu. I appreciate it."

"I think I might stay on Jurai a while." Washu sat back against her boulder, gazing up at the sky. "Now it's peaceful. Help you, spend some time with Tokimi — before I return home to the Earth."

"I thought Lord Tenchi and Lady Ryoko planned to leave in the next day or two." Seiryo was surprised. "That's what Sasami-sama said… was she mistaken?"

"No — I suspect they'll go, but I'm not going with them." Washu shook her head. She smiled. "These newly engaged couples don't need parents playing gooseberry and home isn't exactly a peaceful, romantic retreat for them at the best of times. No, I'll wait here and spend some time with my other family, if you have no objections to my company from time to time. I can always charter a ship or beg a favour from someone to get home, so I'm not overly troubled by being stranded here."

“Then when you’re ready to leave, I’ll take you myself, in the Unko.” Seiryo offered. “It will give me a good excuse to travel, and I’m itching to do so now I have my papers returned.”

“Thank you, that would be nice.” Washu dimpled. “The Unko is a fine ship — I’d very much like to take a closer look at it.”

“So long as you promise not to dismantle or hack into it while we’re in flight, then you’re more than welcome.” Seiryo said drolly, and Washu laughed.

“I give you my word.” She said solemnly. “But it will be nice to fly in it, all the same.”

“If you are going to stay on Jurai a while, would you like to stay here, with us?” Seiryo suggested. “You’d be closer to Tokimi, and I know Suki wouldn’t mind in the least.”

“What about your poor mother?” Washu looked startled. “If you’re thinking I might be able to help her also — I’m sorry, Seiryo, but the risk to her life would be too great. I don’t know enough to guarantee the safety of my dabbling.”

“No… no. I know that Mother is beyond all help.” Seiryo’s eyes clouded and he shook his head. “But she won’t object, either. Suki and I have both mentioned to her how much we respect you, and how you have become a friend to us both in recent months. She’d be glad to extend hospitality here — so you mustn’t concern yourself with that.”

“Well, if that’s the case, it would be easier than staying at the Palace.” Washu grinned. “All right. I accept your offer, Lord Tennan — and with thanks!”

“This is a merry gathering.”

At the sound of a new voice, Seiryo glanced up, surprise touching his features as he recognised the Galaxy Police Detective, neat and smart in her official uniform and an amused smile on her face as she took in the scene before her. Her thick dark hair was wound back from her face in a careful, precise braid and there was a sparkle in her blue eyes which Seiryo had not seen there before. Inwardly he wondered at it. Had she finally thrown off the shackles of their past encounter? Or was she simply putting on a brave face — had Yugi’s distortions made it so that she would never be able to speak to him again?

“No wonder it took so long to get an answer — I was almost wondering if I needed to hit more people over the head with pokers to get in. I suppose it’s a good thing for everyone that I heard laughter

from the gardens and managed to find my way around the back."

"What are you doing here, Kiyone?" Washu looked amused at her words, gesturing for her to join them. "Weren't you contacting your Commander?"

"I was, but Ayeka told me that you and Sasami were here." Kiyone responded with a shrug. She paused, meeting Seiryo's gaze for a moment, then spreading her hands.

"And I wanted to thank you for your help in solving this case, *Agent* Tennan." She added. Seiryo looked sheepish at the use of his former title. He shook his head.

"Not Agent." He responded. "And you owe me nothing. I enjoyed using those skills again."

"Washu! Washu-oneechan, come see Tokimi's flowers!"

A yell from across the grass prevented Kiyone from responding, and Washu got to her feet, casting her companions a playful smile.

"I guess it's my turn to go play with the flowers, now." She said off-handedly. "The things we do for our families, huh?"

She offered Seiryo a wink, then was gone across the grass, leaving the two — Lord and Detective — alone together beneath the tree. For a moment there was an awkward silence, then Seiryo offered a faint smile.

"So, you'll be off now, back to join the Galaxy's finest, I suppose."

Kiyone hesitated, then shook her head, dropping down in Washu's vacated spot and absently picking a flower, toying with it in her hands as she made herself more comfortable.

"No. Not yet." She said evenly. Seiryo looked startled.

"I thought you'd more than cleared your name." He said frankly. "And you don't seem to be suffering any ill effects now from… from you know what. Why won't they let you go back?"

"Oh, they will." A slight smile touched Kiyone's lips, and she tucked the flower carefully into the clasp that held her hair back from her face. "But I decided that they were right about one thing. A holiday isn't a bad idea and now I know I can take it with my reputation intact, I think I deserve it. I've given the Chief my report and he can take his time chewing over it all now I've done the Elite division's work for them and solved their mystery. Headquarters gave me a month, after all, and I guess it wouldn't hurt me to take another week

or two here. After everything that's happened, why not?"

Seiryo stared at her for a moment, then he let out a low chuckle.

"At playing the system, Detective, you are definitely one of the Universe's best." He said appreciatively. "How did your Commander react, when you told him your decision?"

"I think he would have fallen over himself to grant me anything at the time." Kiyone pursed her lips. "He was a bit sheepish. Apologetic. It might have been bad to take advantage, but well, I haven't had a proper holiday in ages. And though I do miss Mihoshi and everything back at Headquarters, I haven't really had a chance to relax since I came here."

"I realise that's partly my fault. I'm sorry for that." Seiryo pursed his lips. Kiyone shrugged.

"No… don't be." She said thoughtfully. "In all truth, being forced into your company was probably what I needed. I never choose the easy path at doing anything — well, you only have to look at my partnership with Mihoshi to see that that's true. And I don't like being made to take a back seat. But having to work with you made me see things in a different way. Put them into perspective, if you like. And after Ayeka went through all of the things she did, it also told me something else. Something I hadn't really grasped hold of before — at least, not properly."

"Which was?" Seiryo looked quizzical, and Kiyone sent him a sheepish smile.

"I *know* Ayeka. I trust her with my life, because there have been times it has been in her hands and vice versa. We've been through a lot of things together, all things considered." She said slowly. "So even though Yugi was controlling her, and even though Yugi made her do terrible things, I wasn't scared of her afterwards. Even though she did turn on me, I knew it wasn't really Ayeka who did that. And that's because I know the real Ayeka would never act like that."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Well, in all honesty, before our little encounter aboard my spaceship, I didn't know you at all." Kiyone stretched out on the grass, idly kicking her legs against the ground as she rested her chin in her hands. She gazed across at him, shrugging her shoulders. "You were a colleague, but only a distant face. I knew you by reputation, and not in any other way. And your reputation was intimidating enough in it's own right. So all I had to associate with you in my mind, after the

assault, was the attack itself. I suppose I obsessed over it because of that… somehow it and you became synonymous in my mind."

"I see." Seiryo pursed his lips thoughtfully. "And now?"

"I still think you're one of the most arrogant men I've ever met, but I don't find it as offensive as I did before." Kiyone said wryly. "I suppose it's just that inbred Juraian charm you nobles have — considering some of your fellow peers, I think I'd rather take your company over theirs. Court swagger, if you like — you definitely have an air of it about you, even now. But, in terms of everything else…"

She shrugged again.

"I think I've seen other parts of you that most people don't get to see." She said slowly. "I've seen how much you care about Suki-sama and Tokimi, and your mother as well. I guess it's easy to see how you were lured into Tokimi's snare so easily — that Suki-sama and Lady Kaede mean the world to you and you really would do anything to protect them. I respect that."

She smiled, taking in his expression with an amused look of her own.

"I've also seen your vulnerability, though." She added thoughtfully. "When you've snapped back at me over things I've said. Washu told me that I only had to recover from being attacked and at the time I was mad at her for saying it, but now I see what she means more clearly. I was just the victim. You were victim *and* villain, and that's much more to deal with for anyone who has a sense of conscience. I suppose that's what I didn't know about you before. Even if you are arrogant, and ambitious, and full of Juraian noble blood — you do have honour and you do have limits. And Tokimi's magic just broke those down. That's all. It wasn't *you* who attacked me that day… because that's something that the real Seiryo Tennan wouldn't do. And now I know that as much as I know the real Ayeka wouldn't try and hurt Sasami. It's just circumstances. When Yugi tried to distort my perceptions and torture me with my memories, I realised they'd become just that — memories. I'd come to know other sides of you — so they didn't hold as much fear for me then as they did before. It kind of broke the spell, if you like."

Seiryo eyed her keenly for a moment, digesting everything that she said. Then he sat back on his elbows, gazing up at the cloudless blue sky.

"When I was a boy, the only thing that mattered to me was being the best." He said quietly. "My father demanded no less of me, and I

was determined to follow in his footsteps — be the Tennan that Senichi was, follow in the proud family tradition. But as I got older, I learnt more and more that the Tennan name was founded on rocky shores. My father may have been honoured by Emperors and trusted of the Council, but he had no respect for my Mother. He gambled away our money, he drank and invested badly in business ventures that went wrong. He pawned Mother's stuff, and attempted to sell Suki to the highest bidder as a rich and influential bride. He even sought to marry me to Princess Ayeka — probably because then he would have had direct access to royal patronage and everything that came with it. He was a bad man, my father. A very bad man, in truth. And when he sent me away, I was angry. But now, having time to reflect on it, I realised that I'm glad he did it. If I'd stayed here, I would have become him. I very nearly did, when I took up with Tokimi and started breaking rules and cutting corners to get what I wanted. And the attack on you — I still wonder how much of it was my desire to win, and how much was Tokimi's dark influence over me. That's the truth of it… I still don't really know. On my own — how far would I have gone? I don't think that I would have sought to kill you if Tokimi hadn't pushed it on me — but then again, I had truly considered taking my father's life, before fate intervened and struck him down. Would that have made me any better a man? I think not."

"I see." Kiyone's expression softened. "Somehow that should bother me, but it really doesn't. I actually appreciate your honesty. You didn't have to tell me that — you could have let me leave all of the blame on Tokimi's head."

"No, I couldn't." Seiryo sent her a wry smile. "I've tried to be honest and to live up to the honour my family name should uphold since my hearing. Besides, if anyone deserves truth about this matter, I think that it's you. And in some respects, Tokimi is less to blame than me. She was fully under Kii control. I confess that my own ambition drove me equally as much as her dark arts, so I'm more culpable for the things that happened."

"Perhaps you're right." Kiyone acknowledged. "But since it's past, you probably shouldn't keep thinking about it so critically. I think I've put closure to it. Have you?"

"I'd like to think so." Seiryo nodded. "If nothing else, I do believe that whatever I might have done then, of my own free will, it wouldn't be the case now. In many ways I am very different from the man who first came back from the Galaxy Police to show off his medals and see his poor mother. And in some respects, I am thankful

for it, too. If nothing else, it taught me that Suki wasn't just there to be protected. She's there to depend upon, also — and I've done so, more than once since my hearing concluded."

He frowned, shaking his head slowly.

"And it taught me what kind of a creature I was on the verge of becoming." He admitted darkly. "I wouldn't call it divine epiphany — I don't believe in such things, as I think you probably have gleaned. But it was a wake-up call I badly needed. I'm just sorry that you came into the crossfire, that's all."

"Well, you needn't bother about it any more." Kiyone shrugged, offering him a smile. "I'm strong and stubborn myself, you know, and it takes a lot more than one brief encounter to knock me for six for long. I'm over it. It's past. And I have a job to get on with, so I will. You're not actually so scary — not close up."

She looked amused.

"Considering the way you court types dress, and the trinkets you use to tie back your hair, I think it would be impossible to stay scared of you now."

Seiryo laughed good-naturedly, reaching up absently to loose his curly hair from his warrior's queue, and allowing it to fall loose around his shoulders. He glanced at the clasp that had held it there, turning it over in his hands as he registered the expensive gold finish and the delicately carved family crest that adorned the middle, and he nodded, setting it down on the grass beside him.

"Perhaps you have a point." He agreed sheepishly. "Since I've been back here, there have been many things for me to find fault with in Jurai's court lifestyle. I really don't know why I wanted it so badly to begin with. Maybe because I'd never been allowed it when I came of age — who really knows? But either way, I agree with you. There is a lot to be said for the simplicity of the Galaxy Police."

Kiyone pursed her lips.

"Will you tell me what the truth is, surrounding Seiji-dono's death?" She asked softly. "Off the record… just between the two of us?"

"It's not my tale to tell you." Seiryo shook his head. "His death was an accident and that's all I'll ever say about it… please, Detective. Don't ask me again."

"All right." Kiyone frowned, tilting her head on one side as she

regarded him carefully. “I never imagined that, if I came to Jurai, I’d wind up talking to you like this. But somehow it doesn’t feel wrong that we are. Maybe it’s that thing Washu said about connections — Yugi and Ayeka, You and Tokimi… perhaps you and *I* have a connection now, too. Maybe at the end of the day, we’re destined to be friends now the magic has gone and the danger with it. We’ve both been through so much — do you feel that, too?”

Seiryo smiled.

“Yes, now you mention it. I think I do.” He agreed. “Perhaps that’s why the whole thing bothered me as much as it did. If you form a bond with someone, you’re then linked to that person irrevocably in some way. Even through a magic that’s long dead — perhaps what bothered me was the fact you suffered because of this and I suffered with you. And both of us have been fixating on the same event for far too long. It should be consigned to history now… locked away and forgotten. Don’t you think so?”

“Yes, I do.” Kiyone agreed. “I don’t want to think about it any more. When I do go back to work, I want it to be back to business as usual. No problems, no panics, no bad dreams. I’ve slept better here than I have done at Headquarters or on Yagami in months. That has to be a good sign. I’m finally moving past the mental block… and I’m glad.”

“I think I am too.” Seiryo reflected. “And I don’t seem to be in the Emperor’s bad books any longer… quite the opposite. Maybe the day will yet come when a Tennan can hold his head up proudly at court again.”

“Or *her* head.” Kiyone reminded him. “Your sister is a lady in her own right, after all, and girls are just as capable as guys of carrying responsibility and dignity.”

“Detective, I have never doubted it in Suki.” Seiryo said ruefully. “Only in myself. Suki has always been a lady, and she has proven these past months how strong a lady she can be. I would be lost without her — sometimes it seems like I hold the reins of the family estate, but she’s the one really driving it on.”

Kiyone glanced across the grass to where Suki was patiently showing Tokimi how to braid white blossoms into Sasami’s thick, wavy hair. She smiled.

“She seems in her element, with Tokimi.” She observed, and Seiryo nodded.

“She’s always been lonely, really.” He agreed. “But not these days. With Lady Sasami and Tokimi, not to mention keeping me in line — she has plenty to occupy her.”

“She has a lot to do, then.” Kiyone remarked astutely, and Seiryo laughed.

“Indeed.” He agreed good-naturedly. “But there you are. Such is the life of a noblewoman of Jurai.”

“Do you really wish you could come back to Headquarters?” Kiyone asked curiously. “I mean really, if there wasn’t anything to tie you down here — would you go and try and get your position back?”

“I’m too proud to go back, even if I didn’t have shackles here.” Seiryo shook his head. “But I do regret losing it, yes.”

He sighed.

“Still, now I have the Unko back, I can at least travel. And I will… being tied to one planet is not fun when you’ve been so used to freely roaming the galaxy.”

He sent her a sidelong glance.

“I still think you would make a fine Elite agent. You really won’t reconsider your decision not to apply?”

“What would Mihoshi do without me?” Kiyone shrugged. “Nice as it would be, I’d also be lonely. She and I have been close for a long time — it wouldn’t be the same. Bonds forged in crisis are often the strongest bonds, you know — and Mihoshi’s middle name might as well be crisis. She needs me too much — and there are more important things than high ranking position.”

“Yes, perhaps that’s so.” Seiryo acknowledged. “You are lucky, to have such a partner.”

“You never had a partner?”

“No… I always worked alone.” Seiryo said ruefully. “I’m arrogant, as you so kindly pointed out. I’m not a team player… it doesn’t suit my style of operation.”

“I disagree.” Kiyone’s expression became playful. “This time you were a team player, after all.”

“Under duress, perhaps I was.” Seiryo rubbed his chin absently. “But still — I did get yelled at rather a lot during the course of that particular assignment.”

Kiyone's eyes twinkled with humour at this and she nodded.

"True." She acknowledged. "I suppose you have a point. You did try and keep your secrets, to begin with, too. But then again, if it means anything, seeing you working this like a proper Elite case proved one thing to me. Your reputation at Headquarters was not exaggerated. Whatever your reasons for becoming an Elite, you really were a natural at it. Jurai should be harnessing that, if they have any sense. They need you more than they know."

"Well, it's pleasant to know you think so, Detective."

"My name is Kiyone. You know that, so you might as well stop being so formal." Kiyone sighed. "I know finesse is a Juraian court protocol, but I'm no high born lady and really, I'd rather you didn't. It feels stand-offish and austere, outside of Headquarters, and you're not my superior officer any longer. Plus, I flat out refuse to call you Lord Tennan and that being the case, it makes me seem rude if you're constantly fishing around for titles to give me."

"Washu and I have already had a similar conversation this afternoon, and I must confess it confuses me." Seiryo looked doubtful. "Is that really what you want?"

Kiyone nodded her head.

"Yes." She said firmly. "My name is Kiyone, and I'm not going to answer to anything else."

"Very well." Seiryo smiled, holding out his hand in a mocking gesture towards her. "Then my name is Seiryo. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Kiyone."

Kiyone stared at him for a moment, then she snorted, taking his hand in hers and shaking it hard.

"There." She replied. "Are you happy?"

"Happier than I've been in a while, to be truthful." Seiryo reflected. "Putting this behind me is important, after all. Washu thinks she might be able to help get rid of my headaches and the tiredness Kii magic still causes in me — but the hang-ups over your situation I had to tackle on my own. I'm satisfied to say that I've succeeded. I suppose it's true that there is very little the mind cannot overcome. Not if it is really determined to win."

"There you go, being pompous and arrogant and Juraian again." Kiyone sighed, shaking her head reproachfully, and Seiryo laughed.

"You are remarkably rude to me, you know." He observed drolly.

“In fact, you have been remarkably rude to me almost since the day we first met.”

“Well, you haven’t exactly been polite to me always, so I think we’re even.” Kiyone said comfortably. “I don’t stand on ceremony with anyone, you know. Mihoshi is of Seniwan Daimyo stock and I yell at her on average five or six times every day. Don’t think that I’m going to be any different with you, now we’ve called a truce. If you don’t like it, you don’t have to speak to me. But we’ve gone too far for pretentious niceties. Don’t you think so?”

“I think you’ve spent far too much time in the company of people like Ryoko and Washu.” Seiryo said acidly. “But on balance, it’s refreshing to talk with someone who speaks plainly.”

Kiyone laughed, nodding her head.

“I’ve always done that. That’s not Washu or Ryoko or anyone else’s influence on me — I’ve never had time for nonsense.” She said with a grin. “My work has been my life, and in my line of work, there’s no room for fussing around.”

“Perhaps you’re also a natural.”

“Maybe.” Kiyone shrugged. “I’ll be glad to be back, honestly. A holiday is nice, and I mean to take advantage of my free time, but in the final analysis Headquarters is my home and being a Detective is my raison d’etre. I can’t imagine ever doing — or being — anything else.”

“But you have wide horizons, considering your close friendships with Princesses of my planet.” Seiryo pointed out. “You shouldn’t ignore other opportunities, just because you haven’t gone looking for them yet.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Kiyone looked confused. Seiryo shrugged.

“Meaning that it’s too easy to become shackled and trapped in one world, that’s all.” He said thoughtfully. “Being restricted to Jurai made me see that clearly, and your loyalty to your career and your partner might easily shackle you, also. I appreciate that friendship ranks above ambition in your life — in truth, it’s a concept I admire and one I am doing my best to adopt. But don’t let it restrict you from reaching out and experiencing other things, too. You never know what might be out there, and that’s part of the fun of it.”

“Now who’s been spending too much time with Washu?” Kiyone arched an eyebrow, and Seiryo offered her a wry smile.

“Perhaps.” He acknowledged. “But you have a lot to give the universe, Kiyone. Even before Tokimi sent me to kill you, I knew of your reputation and I knew that you were more than just an average officer. Don’t let that ability be wasted. That’s all.”

“I don’t think that I could waste anything, now.” Kiyone admitted. “I’ve been in dangerous situations many times, but in the last six months two attempts have been made on my life directly. The first one only told me to be afraid, but the second… the second told me that I’m good enough at what I do to be a threat to the people I’m out there to stop. And that’s a good thing, even if it does mean I get targeted from time to time. It’s a *part* of doing my job — to hit so close to the truth and to bring someone to justice.”

She sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“I won’t be an Elite, because I won’t leave Mihoshi to flounder on her own.” She continued. “Mitsuki and some of the others can be a lot meaner to her than I am, and she does rely on me an awful lot. But I would like to make a difference where I can — that’s why I signed up in the first place, after all.”

Seiryo nodded his head slowly, leaning back against the tree as he sent her a crooked smile.

“Then maybe I should take advantage of this new-found truce of ours, and teach you some of the tricks of the trade.” He said softly. Kiyone looked startled, then she returned his smile, nodding her head.

“I think I’d like that.” She said sincerely. Seiryo shrugged.

“Then I will.” He said simply. “After all, perhaps I can no longer do my job as an Elite… but that doesn’t mean I can’t help you to improve your arsenal against the dangers out there. And if you are going to continue putting your life in danger, you should at least know some techniques that might one day save you from another mad Juraian nobleman with a sword and too much power on his mind.”

Kiyone laughed, nodding her head appreciatively.

“It might just.” She agreed, holding out her hand and after a moment of hesitation, Seiryo took it, shaking it firmly. Kiyone grinned.

“Very well, Lord Tennan.” She said playfully. “It’s a deal.”